**inclusion**designlab

# Circles of Support for people with acquired brain injury

## A guide to forming and resourcing Circles of Support

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## About Inclusion Melbourne

Inclusion Melbourne has supported people with intellectual and cognitive disability for more than 75 years. With a core focus on social inclusion, we help people build genuine relationships, develop recreational and vocational skills, exercise citizenship, and pursue meaningful employment and education.

Our centre for policy, research and advocacy, Inclusion Designlab, brings together people with disability, organisations, government and researchers to co-design new models of practice. We share our insights through training, media, peak bodies and policy submissions, and build sector capacity with accessible materials and training in quality improvement, supported decision making, positive behaviour support, LGBTIQA+ inclusion, oral health and political inclusion.

Inclusion Designlab has worked with many organisations and people with disability to explore how Circles of Support can best assist people with intellectual disability.

## National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards (COSAM)

Inclusion Melbourne partnered with other organisations to create a website and resources to help people with intellectual disability and those they trust. These tools support people to start their own Circle of Support and work towards their goals.

The COSAM website (www.cosam.org.au) includes videos, booklets, factsheets and reports.

## Transport Accident Commission (TAC)

This guide was funded by TAC as part of the 2023 Small Grants Program. TAC is a Victorian government and organisation it's role is to promote safety support people who are injured on our roads and help them get their lives back on track.

TAC also funds community projects that improve the lives of TAC clients and Victorians with disability, including people with ABI. Inclusion Melbourne thanks TAC for its great support.

**Suggested Citation**

## What is this guide?

Circles of Support are a powerful and practical way to support people with acquired brain injury (ABI) to live a meaningful, connected, and independent life. A Circle brings together people chosen by the person with ABI – friends, family, and others—to work towards shared goals and personal visions.

This guide explains:

- What Circles of Support are and what they are not
- How Circles can benefit people with acquired brain injury
- How to form and facilitate a Circle
- How Circles align with Supported Decision Making (SDM)
- How Circles can be sustainably funded

## Who is this guide for?

- Families, friends, and allies who want to support a person with ABI to build a Circle of Support.
- Support coordinators, case managers, or professionals in similar roles who want to learn more about Circles and/or how to start the planning process.
- Professionals who work in roles responsible for funding and/or planning supports for people with acquired brain injury. This includes insurance agencies, government funded support or recovery agencies, and non-profit or for-purpose organisations. In particular this guide helps funders and planners work out how to review or measure the strength, outcomes or gaps present in plans or facilitation quotes for a Circle of Support.

## Do you want a Circle of Support for yourself?

Are you a person with acquired brain injury who wants to build a circle for yourself? It is such a great way to get help to reach your goals, make sense of the recovery journey, and strengthen your relationships! Here are some things you should know about this guide:

- This guide is addressed to lots of people, so it talks about people with ABI. However, we want people with ABI (like you!) to read it too.
- You can ask someone to help you read this guide and put it into action. You could ask friends or family members. You could ask a social worker, neuropsychologist, occupational therapist, or someone else.



## Who wrote this guide?

Inclusion Melbourne brought together people with disability, experts in Circles of Support, and professionals who work with people with acquired brain injury to write this Guide.

Our Project Advisory Group members shared their experiences and suggestions and helped to develop the Guide.

Members of the Project Advisory Group are:

**Abrahim Darouiche,**
**Peer Facilitator**, Diversity and Disability Alliance

**Aimee Jeffreys,**
**Clinical Neuropsychologist**, The Centre for Whole Body Health

**David Eldridge,**
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**Emily Maxwell,**
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**Jaquie Mills,**
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**Meredith Coote,**
**Consultant and public speaker; professional and lived experience across disability**, aged care, mental health and carer sectors

**Mischelle Surawski,**
**Social Worker/ Specialist Support Coordinator** Community Living Association

**Nathan Despott,**
**Head of Policy**, Research and Advocacy, Inclusion Melbourne

**Tasha Clifford,**
**Assistant Director**, Scheme Design/Agency Policy, National Disability Insurance Agency

We also looked for new information that was important and helpful about the best way to run Circles of Support for people with ABI from:

- People With Acquired Brain Injury
- ABI focused organisations
- Online sources.

People with ABI were supported to participate in the project. They shared their ideas, experience and suggestions to make sure the Guide is helpful for people with ABI and the people important to them.

# Acquired brain injury (ABI)

An acquired brain injury, often called ABI, is an injury to the brain that:

- occurs any time after birth
- results in an (or causes) impairment or change in cognitive, physical, emotional and/or independent functioning

ABIs can result from:

- traumatic brain injury (TBI) - a physical injury or direct insult to the brain, such as those sustained in sports, motor vehicle/other accidents, or assaults
- stroke, aneurysm or brain bleed
- degenerative neurological diseases
- incidents where there has been a lack of oxygen to the brain
- a tumour
- substance abuse
- infection or neuroinflammation

Brain injury is common. The Australian Bureau of Statistics tracks the number of Australians who have a 'brain injury that causes daily activity limitations and participation restrictions'. Here are some of the latest figures:

**Over 700,000 Australians have this type of brain injury**

**Three in every four of these people are aged 65 or under**

**As many as two out of every three acquired their brain injury before the age of 25**

**Three-quarters of people with a brain injury are men.**

The long-term direct effects of brain injury are hard to predict. The effects will be different for each person and can range from mild to profound. They can include:

- increased fatigue (mental and physical)
- medical difficulties (e.g. headaches or seizures)
- changes in sensory abilities (eg. impaired vision, touch, smell)
- impaired physical abilities (eg. weakness, impaired balance and co-ordination, etc.)
- taking longer to process information, plan and solve problems
- impaired memory and ability to think and learn (eg. forgetfulness, poor attention)
- changes in behaviour and personality (eg. short tempered, lethargic, flat or depressed)
- changes to interpersonal conduct and relationships
- impaired ability to communicate (eg. slow or slurred speech, difficulty following conversation)
- difficulty assessing options and/or making decisions, leaving people with ABI vulnerable to external risks

(Sources: AIHW 2007, Brain Injury Australia, Dr Aimee Jeffreys)

Changes as a result of an acquired brain injury can be permanent, temporary or changeable. Many ABIs, such as TBIs, can remain stable or improve over time. However, neurodegenerative conditions and impairments may continue to deteriorate over time.

Recovery after brain injury differs from person to person. It depends on:

- the type of brain injury
- where the brain is injured
- the severity of the brain injury
- the type, quality and coordination of medical, psychological and other allied health or rehabilitative supports – in the short, mid and long term
- the mental health of the person
- the quality, resources and coordination of natural supports and community connection in the person's life – in the short, mid and long term.

In the longer term, most people with ABI report changes in thinking and behaviour while only 25% of people with a severe ABI will experience ongoing physical disability. Changes in thinking and behaviour are hard for other people to recognise. People who do not understand the hidden difficulties associated with an ABI may form incorrect assumptions or conclusions about the person. For example, believing the person is being 'lazy' or difficult.

Although there may be some similarities between intellectual disability and ABI, they are not the same. ABI is recognised as a separate disability across Australia's health, disability, and human services systems. People with ABI usually retain their overall intellectual abilities but have difficulty with specific thinking skills. People with ABI can experience significant recovery and improvement in brain function over time.

People with ABI and their family, friends and supporters need time to adjust, both physically and emotionally, and to find a new equilibrium. The loss of abilities or function, coupled with changes to personality, can lead to experiences of isolation and loneliness following loss of social connections, changes in family dynamics and roles, impacts on self-worth and identity , loss of employment and a reduced ability to engage in recreational, social, and/or vocational activities.

For people with an acquired brain injury (ABI), their existing support networks can change - especially when critical post-acute support is reduced or ends. Ongoing support structures are needed but are often not adequately resourced or planned for. Natural supports can also be significantly affected, and the person may require ongoing assistance to avoid (or to help prevent?) social isolation.

(Sources: Brain Injury Australia, Queensland Health, Dr Aimee Jeffreys)

## How Circles of Support benefit people with Acquired Brain Injury

Circles are well-suited to address the many of the difficulties experienced by people with acquired brain injury. Circles can build social connection, assist in developing independence by supporting long-term planning, and provide a foundation for personal and community-based decision-making. Circles are especially powerful during transitions – such as leaving rehab or changing living arrangements – when clear planning and support is critical.

Circles of Support boost the quality of supports by offering a structured and person-centred way to build capacity, connection, and confidence.

Circles support continuity, inclusion, and personalised planning. They bring together people who know the person well, have a substantial volume of expertise and social capital, and are committed to working collaboratively toward goals that matter most to the person with ABI.

These messages are from people with lived experience of ABI. Inclusion Melbourne thanks the members of the Lifechanging Group for their generosity in sharing their experiences.

*"I like the model…it's putting the person who is being supported in the centre, to allow them to make the decisions."*

*"Circles could be something that would help you feel like you are more in control."*

## What is a Circle of Support?

A Circle of Support is a group of people who meet regularly with a person with a disability to collectively meet a range of needs, according to the guidance and wishes of the person. For people with acquired brain injury, the Circle can:

- Help them achieve their goals – both formal goals in a person's support plan and
- Explore options and opportunities
- Maintain or build relationships
- Connect with the community
- Strengthen natural supports

- Challenge isolation
- Support the person to review their supports and service mix
- Assist with life areas such as employment, independent living, further education, communication, civic engagement, health, and wellbeing
- Help a person navigate new supports
- Find new meaning and purpose during the rehabilitation journey
- Support the person to build relationships around a personal project or plan.

Every Circle is different. Some are highly structured with clear roles, while others may be more informal or evolve over time. What matters is that the person with ABI is at the centre, directing the process, supported to communicate their will and preferences, and surrounded by people who are acting in alignment with their values and vision.

The coloured boxes below outline 8 keys to understanding Circles of Support. This guide will explain more about them.

These messages are from people with lived experience of ABI from The Life Changing Group (NSW).

> *"I like that you choose who you want in your circle, and that those people would have more of a vested interest in your wellbeing, rather than just the carers and paid support people who work with you"*

> *"So this could be a positive exercise in getting assistance and learning how to take charge of your own life and your own existence."*

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**A person has had support to learn about Circles. They decide they want a Circle of Support.**

**The Circle is made up of members who are from different parts of the person's life. They bring their different experiences. They are chosen by the person and they focus on the person.**

**The Circle has 5-10 people (with some exceptions). The Circle meets together usually every 6-8 weeks, with the person always present and in control.**

**The Circle has a Facilitator – usually paid - who is trained in how to support a Circle. The Facilitator makes sure the Circle:**

- **has guidelines and boundaries**
- **is Person Centred**
- **runs smoothly**
- **is sustainable and accountable**

**The Circle works with the person to towards a range of goals that the person chooses. Mid-term, mid-level goals are best. This can include employment, education, living arrangements, travel, learning about politics and identity, and more!**

**The Circle becomes a place for active connection, strong relationships, and transformation. Members use their connections to build the person's social network. They overcome obstacles and build the person's options and experiences.**

**Circles can drive quality and safeguarding in the person's life. The members and well planned meetings can help the person navigate complex services. They can support quality control for services, advocate for the person, and support the person to manage risk rather than avoid it.**

**Some Circles are unique:**

- **Some can become an incorporated organisation. This is a Microboard.**
- **Circles for people experiencing significant isolation, health barriers, or complex needs may look a little different when they start. However, these are some of the most powerful Circles!**
- **Some Circles don't need a paid facilitator, but this is unusual.**
- **Sometimes the person at the centre of the circle becomes the Chair of their meetings. This is great!**

## What a Circle is not

A Circle of Support can be a wonderful way to change a person's life. However, this means that Circles of Support need to have some clear boundaries to make sure they don't lose the key ingredients that make them special.

### A Circle of Support is not: ❌

- A temporary arrangement that serves one purpose for specific third parties. For example, a group of people that meets with a person with disability as part of a short-term research project is not a Circle of Support.
- Intended to be a tool for one-off formal planning and service delivery. A group of people that comes together with a person with disability once every one or two years to write a Person Centred Plan is not a Circle of Support.
- Contingent upon, or solely dedicated to, management of the person's support funding or other funds.
- Primarily a crisis intervention tool. Circles can be hugely supportive for a person in crisis, however this is not their primary intention and not all Circles will cope with crises in the same way.

### Circles of Support do not: ❌

- Automatically replace or remove the need for funded supports in the person's life.
- Make decisions on behalf of the person – even if they know the person well and deeply understand the person's will and preference regarding a range of matters.
- Include paid staff as regular, ongoing members. Paid staff may attend some meetings, however conflicts of interest must be carefully managed. An exception is when paid staff are part of a Foundation Circle. See the section about paid staff later.
- Take direction from a disability support provider, advocacy organisation or funding body, even if one of these types of body has had a key role in a circle's formation. Circles are primarily accountable to the person at their centre.

### It is not OK for a Circle of Support to: ❌

- Operate without the consent of the person with disability who is at the centre of the Circle.
- Function without a set of Guiding Principles (or equivalent), and basic documented processes that outline how and when meetings will occur.
- Force the person at the centre to consider or make decisions about things with which they are not yet ready to engage.

### Circles of Support must: ⚠️

- Take time to clarify the communication style, needs, wants and goals of the person using a person-centred approach that employs supported decision-making processes.
- Operate at a pace that is right for the person at the centre, not the other members.
- Have a clearly identified facilitator or co-facilitator to ensure that the Circle's meetings, activities and operations are well coordinated and documented.

# Natural supports

## Natural Supports: What they are and why they matter

The term natural supports is often used in policy and planning but can feel vague or confusing in real life. In this guide, natural supports means the people in someone's life who provide help or connection because they care and because they want to be there, not because they're paid to do so.

These can include:

- Friends and family
- Neighbours
- Members of a faith or cultural community
- People from sports clubs or shared-interest groups
- Former colleagues or mentors

Natural supports can make a powerful difference in someone's life, especially after an acquired brain injury. They provide:

- **Stability** — someone who checks in and sticks around
- **Continuity** — someone who knows the person's story and values
- **Insight** — someone who understands what matters to the person
- **Connection** — someone who helps maintain a link to community and identity

Circles of Support are one way to make sure that natural supports are:

- Recognised
- Organised
- Supported to last
- Connected to the person's goals

## Natural supports should not be seen as a replacement for funded supports

Natural supports are sometimes framed by funders as a way to reduce the need for paid services. But this is a misunderstanding. Strong natural supports take time and effort to build, and they do not replace the need for funded assistance.

In fact, many people with acquired brain injury (ABI) need paid support to help them connect with, maintain, or re-establish natural supports. This could include:
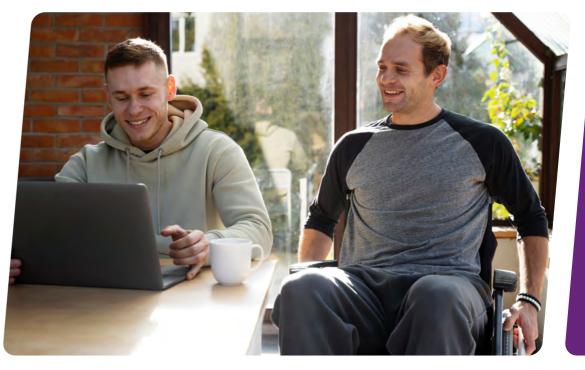
- Assistance from psychologists, social workers, or support coordinators who help to build the person's capacity to maintain important relationships.
- Direct support workers who have a deep connection with the person and can support communication, social interaction, and relationship building.
- Direct support workers who accompany the person for mobility, health, or personal care reasons – even while the person is catching up with natural supports.

Some natural supporters also play an important role in overseeing how formal supports are delivered, providing continuity, quality checks, and relational insight that helps paid systems work better. Others provide a range of personal, direct support tasks when spending time with the person – however this may be exhausting, temporary, or only possible if there is paid oversight to complement it.

Circles of Support are one of the most powerful ways to mobilise and empower natural supports to play their part confidently. Circles reduce the pressure and isolation experienced by natural supports who are not connected to each other. They provide an opportunity for people who care about a person with ABI to contribute support in ways that they may not have otherwise considered.

# Guiding principles for Circles of Support

These principles reflect best practice from Inclusion Melbourne's longstanding work in co-designing Circles with people with cognitive disability, including people with acquired brain injury.

People who celebrate and promote Circles of Support often talk about a set of key ideas that underpin them. In fact, most Circles of Support each have their own set of Guiding Principles – even if they don't always call them 'guiding principles'. They might call them 'group rules' or something else. There is more information about the guiding principles for individual circles later in this guide.

For now, here are some of the guiding principles that are most common across the organisations and groups that support Circles. They ensure that Circles remain person-centred and stay focused on empowerment, inclusion, informed decision making, and quality of life.

Circles are about the person:

- The person's needs, wants, and preferences are understood, respected, and central.
- The person drives the Circle. Nothing happens without their consent.
- The Circle is accountable to the person, not to service providers or external agendas.

## Person-centred approaches:

- The Circle takes a holistic, flexible, and responsive approach.
- Supports are built around the person, not the system.
- Members value what matters most to the person and adapt accordingly.
- Circles create a rhythm of meeting, reflecting, and adjusting that suits the person at the centre.

## Supported decision making and choice:

- The person is supported to make decisions and explore options, using strategies that suit their communication style.
- The Circle environment is structured to support decision making without pressure.
- Circles promote confidence, self-reflection, and supported delegation when desired.
- The Circle builds an understanding of the practice of Supported Decision Making. This includes the obligations of formal supports, the boundaries of guardianship and Powers of Attorney, and how to use Supported Decision Making in different ways at different times.

## Self-determination and agency:

- The Circle supports the person to build their identity. This means get a clearer sense of who they are and why they are unique and important.
- The Circle members and meetings should help the person build a strong sense of their agency and self-determination. This means the person knows they have the right to make decisions. They also know the broad range of things they can make decisions about – and how to get support to do this.
- The person has the right to step back or change their mind about the Circle. This includes the right to make changes about its form, members, meeting frequency, and even whether it continues to exist – at any point.
- The Circle builds a working awareness of duress, influence, coercion, subconscious bias and how to:
  - identify them
  - understand their impact
  - discuss them in group meetings when they arise
  - help the focus person identify them in other parts of their life
  - support the person to navigate situations when they occur

## Relationships and connection:

- The Circle acts as a bridge to broader social opportunities.
- The Circle collectively challenges the impacts of, and potential for, isolation.
- Deepening relationships—both within the Circle and beyond—are a central goal.
- The Circle includes members who bring a wide range of lived, social, cultural, and professional experiences. Members are encouraged to draw on their community connections, resources, and experiences in helping the person to reach their goals.

## Circles and their members commit to:

- Maintaining clear, respectful communication with one another
- Advocating for the person's voice to be heard and understood.
- Being open to learning more about the person's goals, needs, and communication style.
- Taking personal responsibility for contributing to the Circle's success through following up actions, engaging their networks, and other means.
- Using appropriate documentation and tracking (e.g. meeting notes, action lists) to ensure continuity and integrity.
- Participating in planning, decision making, problem solving, sharing knowledge, supporting creativity.
- Helping the person explore their mid-term and long-term goals and the small steps that lead there.
- Maintaining a collaborative tone while honouring personal boundaries and privacy.

# Supported decision making

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is a way of working alongside a person with disability to help them make decisions about their life. It includes the right to explore options, try things out, and change their mind.

For someone with acquired brain injury, making decisions can feel very different to how it used to be. Many people with ABI made most of their own decisions before their injury. Losing that independence and confidence can be upsetting – not just for the person, but also for their family and friends. Circles of Support can help with this. They provide a space where the person is supported to rebuild their agency and decision-making confidence, with others walking alongside them.

Circles of Support and Supported Decision Making fit together very well. Circles offer trusted relationships, regular conversations, and a strong foundation for exploring choices. Circle members create space and time for the person to think through options across areas like housing, health, work, and relationships. They also recognise that how someone communicates – and how they make decisions – can change over time.

This is a big shift from the old **best interests** approach that existed in guardianship in Victoria in the past, where decisions were often made for a person – even if those choices didn't match what they actually wanted. Another way of saying this is **substitute decision making**. That approach has mostly been phased out. These days, the focus is on will and preference. This means supporting the person to make their own decisions, in their own way, even when others might have chosen differently. It's not about taking over. It's about staying close, listening carefully, and helping the person shape their own path.

**Key elements of Supported Decision Making in Circles:**

- Decisions are not rushed. The person is supported to express will and preference over time.
- Members observe and reflect back what they notice about the person's reactions, expressions, and responses.
- The Circle helps the person compare options and evaluate experiences.
- The group supports consistency in applying the person's known values to new or complex scenarios.

**Safeguards against substitute decision making include:**

- Clear confirmation and, in many cases, documentation of the person's preferences and how they are expressed.
- Review of decisions to confirm alignment with the person's evolving wishes.
- Checking for ongoing consent—especially when plans or needs change.

**Delegated decision making and boundaries:**

- Some people may choose to delegate decisions. This is a valid element of Supported Decision Making when:
  - The person understands the nature of the decision.
  - The person chooses who to delegate it to.
  - There is a clear plan for review and accountability.
- Circles can support this by helping the person:
  - Explore which decisions matter most to them.
  - Identify areas where they want to delegate.
  - Define how those decisions should be made and checked.

# Putting Supported Decision Making into action

There are many ways of doing Supported Decision Making (SDM). Some good **models** and **toolkits** have been developed in Australia. You can learn more about these in Part F of this guide.

Supported Decision Making can have many different **steps, processes**, or **considerations** . Each of these can be used at different times and in different situations. Some of these different situations include:

- Helping a person understand and build their identity
- Making decisions about healthcare
- Making sure guardianship arrangements respect the person's rights
- Making a set of small decisions about daily support
- Supporting someone to make decisions about something that is upsetting them, particularly when they are distressed.

The table below identifies common steps and processes of Supported Decision Making (SDM) and gives examples of how each step can be used in a Circle of Support. Some things to note about this table:

- The Consent and Communication processes need to be a part of all approaches to Supported Decision Making step.
- Looking at the rest of the steps, some of them are a really obvious way of doing Supported Decision Making – like **Choosing not to Choose** or **Thinking about Consequences and Risk**.
- Other steps are not really a form of Supported Decision Making by themselves. They need to be put together with other steps. For example, the step called **Mapping past experiences** is a good way to help someone think about their life. When you add the **Planning for Capacity Building** step and the **Understanding how smaller goals lead to bigger goals** step, you have the beginnings of a Supported Decision Making plan!

A good way to use this table is to work out which steps and processes are super relevant for the person as they build their Circle of Support. Make a list of five, ten or fifteen steps that you would like the Circle members to learn more about.

| SDM step or process | What could this look like in a Circle of Support? |
|---|---|
| **Consent**<br><br>Consent is the foundation of supported decision making. It means the person is:<br><br>• Supported to decide (in a way that makes sense to them) if they want your **support to make a decision**. You may need to share some background information in accessible ways.<br>• Supported using SDM (including some of the steps below) to **work out if they agree to something or not**. | The Circle supports the person to understand or work out:<br><br>• If they want to have a Circle.<br>• Each step in the Circle building process.<br>• Each item discussed in each meeting.<br><br>With the use of SDM (including steps in this table), the Circle helps the person:<br><br>• Learn background information about each decision that they need or want to make.<br>• Work out if they agree to something or not.<br>• Learn different ways of saying 'Yes', 'No', or 'I want to know more'. |

| SDM step or process | What could this look like in a Circle of Support? |
|---|---|
| **Communication Support**<br><br>Effective decision making depends on communication. Supporters take time to understand and respond to the person's preferred methods – whether verbal, visual, written, or through a range of actions. Communication support also includes:<br><br>• Adjusting strategies over time and ensuring everyone involved understands how the person expresses understanding and choice.<br>• Supporting the person to explore new ways to communicate – with words, devices, writing, and other ways. | As a group, Circle members can work with the person to:<br><br>• Map all the ways the person communicates – including the different ways the person communicates with each Circle member.<br>• Support consistent communication by becoming a group of 'communication partners'.<br>• Help the person use new devices, or take turns making information in easy language.<br>• Review the work of speech pathologists and other professionals who work with the person. |
| **Mapping past experiences**<br><br>Our past shapes how we see the future. This step is about helping the person explore what they've experienced—and what they haven't. It reveals gaps, missed chances, and important life areas that might need more attention, like friendships, work, identity, or community life. | Collectively building a picture of gaps across:<br><br>• **Broad life domains**, like education, employment, living arrangements, health, social life, family, community, and recreation.<br>• **Citizenship and identity domains**, like intimate relationships, sexual orientation, gender identity, career, faith, culture, politics, unique or risky recreation and interests, building a family. |
| **Seeing the same person in every part of life**<br><br>Sometimes, different services, teams, or even family members have very different ideas about the person's capacity, identity, or needs. This might be due to poor communication, missing plans, or not checking in with the person.<br><br>• Are there mixed messages in their support plans?<br>• Are parts of their life – like friendships, identity or goals – being ignored?<br>• Are they treated like an adult in some places, but like a child in others?<br>• How can you help the person think about what they want others to know about them – and where things might need to change? | Over time, Circles can:<br><br>• Help the person notice and reflect on differences in how they're seen by others, then support the person to advocate for change if needed.<br>• Support more consistency across life areas – like privacy, relationships, health, and support – and make sure they are not being ignored.<br>• Build a shared understanding of the person's values and goals and (with consent) review the different plans and processes written by others about the person.<br>• Spot gaps or contradictions in how the person is understood by others – including in formal plans created by paid supports. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Recognising types of decisions**<br><br>People make many different kinds of decisions across their life — from small daily choices to big life-shaping ones. This step involves helping the person explore and name the different types of decisions in their life. It includes:<br><br>• Decisions they need to make<br>• Decisions they want to make<br>• Decisions they may want to delegate<br><br>The goal is to build the person's awareness of their own decision-making landscape, and what support they might want (or not want) for different types of decisions. | Circle members talk with the person about the different types of decisions in their life. They might even map them out together.<br><br>The Circle helps the person reflect on which decisions they want to lead, which ones they feel unsure about, and which might be better supported or shared. |
| **Choosing not to choose**<br><br>Sometimes the most powerful choice a person can make is to say, "I don't want to choose right now" or "These options don't feel right." This step recognises that the person has the right to say no, to ask for more time, or to question the options being offered. In some settings, like day programs, people might be given a small set of choices that aren't meaningful or fair. This step is about noticing when the choices aren't real or good enough, and speaking up. | The Circle helps the person:<br><br>• Say "not right now" without feeling pressured.<br>• Speak up if the options being offered aren't right or feel too limited.<br>• Ask for better options, more time, or more support to decide. |
| **Wanting someone else we trust to make a decision for us.**<br><br>Sometimes we're tired, busy, or just not that interested in a particular decision. Sometimes we have too many other big decisions to make. This step is about supporting the person to choose someone they trust to make a decision for them. It's still their choice – and they can take back that decision whenever they want. | The Circle:<br><br>• Helps the person decide which decisions they'd like someone else to make.<br>• Makes sure the person understands what the decision is about.<br>• Checks that the arrangement is safe, clear, and can be changed later. |
| **Having different supporters for different decisions.**<br><br>People may want different supporters for different topics—like family for health decisions, or a friend for personal issues like intimate relationships, sexuality, or politics. This step is about helping the person choose who they want involved, based on trust, privacy, and the kind of decision. | The Circle supports the person to:<br><br>• Choose different supporters for different types of decisions.<br>• Keep private or sensitive decisions with people they feel safest with.<br>• Make sure each supporter knows their role and respects the boundaries. |
| **Building background knowledge that I need to make decisions**<br><br>Everyone needs some background information to make informed choices. This includes helping the person access, understand, and reflect on relevant information in ways that make sense to them. It may involve easy language text, videos, storytelling, breaking things down step by step, or sharing some history. | Circle members help the person understand information linked to decisions. This might mean:<br><br>• Breaking down complex information (e.g. health options).<br>• Sharing videos or stories to explain choices.<br>• Supporting the person to ask questions and gather trusted opinions.<br>• Learning together – over time – about where some of the systems that impact the person come from. |

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| **Using easy language**<br><br>Finding easy language information. This includes recognising that supporters have a LOT of power if a person is reliant on them for mediating access to information. | The Circle:<br><br>• Helps locate and share easy language materials or use alternative formats to support understanding. This could include working through a range of guides from Inclusion Designlab, Microboards Australia, Inclusion Australia, and others.<br>• Commits to using easy language – and less jargon – when talking together in meetings. |
| **Communicating in different ways**<br><br>This step is about using language and non-verbal ways of sharing ideas. It means people might answer a question differently depending on how you ask it. It also means asking questions in different ways and being open to repeating or showing something more than once. It may mean **not** using questions at all, but using different types of sentences or comments to see how the person responds. It might involve:<br><br>• Changing how each person uses questions, including Yes/No questions, or not using questions at all.<br>• Using communication boards or pictures.<br>• Using options to help explore whether someone likes or does not like something. | The Circle can:<br><br>• Compare how the person responds to different members asking the same thing in different ways.<br>• Use Circle time to brainstorm better ways of communicating ideas or choices together.<br>• Share what's worked well individually, so the group builds a shared toolkit.<br>• Try co-creating new visual tools, routines, or interaction styles that match the person's preferences.<br>• Reflect together on what helps the person feel understood, and embed that across all Circle activity. |
| **Understanding how smaller goals lead to bigger goals**<br><br>This step builds on the *It's My Choice!* model of supported decision making. It explains the difference between everyday decisions, lifestyle decisions, and long-term or big-picture decisions. It helps connect daily choices to bigger goals, and supports the person to reflect when their feelings or motivation change. For example, if someone starts skipping an activity that was linked to a bigger goal, is that just a bad day—or a sign that their goals have changed? | The Circle helps the person map out their everyday, lifestyle and big-picture choices and goals. For example:<br><br>• Everyday decisions – what to eat, what to wear, what to do in their spare time.<br>• Lifestyle decisions – routines, activities, friendships, support mix.<br>• Big-picture decisions – where to live long-term, goals around identity, work, or learning.<br><br>The Circle helps the person:<br><br>• Understand how small steps link to bigger dreams.<br>• Understand how bigger goals might be affected by changes to what they do or choose at the everyday or lifestyle level.<br>• Make sure their choices at the three levels are reflected in support planning. |
| **Reviewing communication and shared meaning**<br><br>Communication support is not a one-off task. It needs to be reviewed and refined regularly. This step involves checking whether communication tools are still working, whether understanding is shared, and whether people need support to interpret or express preference. | After initial efforts to understand communication, the Circle:<br><br>• Returns to check whether shared meaning is still clear<br>• Adjusts how they listen and respond, updating tools if needed<br>• Helps new members learn how the person shows preference, understanding, and consent.<br>• This step ensures communication support stays effective as people and contexts change. |

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| **Planning for capacity building**<br><br>This step focuses on the future, but it also involves understanding some of the past. It means creating opportunities for the person to learn, grow, and try new things. Capacity building doesn't always mean formal training—it can include trying new activities, meeting new people, or developing confidence in small steps. | The Circle helps the person identify areas they want to grow or try something new. Circle members help:<br><br>• Brainstorm new experiences or settings.<br>• Support safe exposure to new people, places, and opportunities.<br>• Make sure new things are well paced and meaningful. |
| **Exploring options and needs**<br><br>People with disability often have fewer real options presented to them. This step involves broadening what's on the table during each particular decision -helping the person look at both conventional and unconventional possibilities, and comparing them in a way that feels meaningful. | The Circle supports the person to:<br><br>• Explore a wide range of options, not just familiar or "safe" ones<br>• Compare different paths and ideas<br>• Build confidence to reflect, decide, and take action<br>• Identify what they want more or less of in their life |
| **Support of key relationships to understand *will and preference*, while avoiding a *best interests* approach.**<br><br>When someone communicates inconsistently or non-verbally, close relationships can help identify patterns and preferences. Supporters who know the person well can reflect on what they've observed, interpret meaning, and compare insights with others to clarify what the person wants.<br><br>This differs from a 'best interests' approach, where others make decisions based on what they believe is **best**, rather than what the person **wants**. Supporters can explore risks, benefits, and consequences—but must avoid overriding, protecting, or steering the person's choices. | The Circle builds a strong, trusting team of people who know the person well and can:<br><br>• Support them to work out and express their preferences – with or without words.<br>• By listening closely, reflect back what they notice, share insights, help interpret meaning, identify patterns over time, and recognise subtle forms of communication.<br>• Help clarify what the person wants, even when communication is inconsistent.<br>• Maintain focus on the person's values and wishes, avoiding a 'best interests' approach. |
| **Testing barriers and limitations**<br><br>Barriers are often built around assumptions. This step involves identifying and challenging restrictions in the person's life—whether practical, attitudinal, or systemic. It means checking whether limits are still needed, and supporting the person to push back or request change. | The Circle:<br><br>• Questions restrictions to see if they are real, necessary or assumed.<br>• Checks if limits are still needed.<br>• Helps the person challenge unfair or outdated rules.<br>• Questions old rules or limits.<br>• Helps weigh up whether they are still needed or are just based on habit or fear.<br>• Supports the person to challenge barriers where needed. |
| **Thinking through consequences and risk**<br><br>Supporting someone to take risks safely is part of real decision making. This step involves helping the person think through possible outcomes, plan for contingencies, and develop strategies for when things go wrong—without blocking growth. | The Circle:<br><br>• Supports the person to think about what might happen in different situations.<br>• Helps develop strategies for safety.<br>• Encourages supported risk-taking, not total risk avoidance. |

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| **Expanding life options and experiences**<br><br>Sometimes people need to see and try new things before they know what they want. This step is about giving the person opportunities to explore, meet people, visit places, and discover interests that could shape their future decisions.<br><br>It is vital that this happens within and across domains of life, particularly where there have been gaps in particular areas of the person's life experience. | **The Circle:**<br><br>• Looks for ways to broaden what the person sees and experiences.<br>• Helps build confidence to try new things.<br>• Introduces the person to new people, places, or routines.<br>• Reflects together about what the person enjoyed or didn't enjoy. |
| **Making decisions in the moment**<br><br>Supported decision making doesn't only happen during planning meetings. Real decisions happen all the time—in cafes, in conversations, at home. This step values and supports spontaneous, everyday decision making as a valid expression of agency. It includes developing plans and protocols for how a person will manage situations that require a quick decision to be made. | **The Circle:**<br><br>• Recognises and celebrates moments of independence.<br>• Supports the person to act without over-helping.<br>• Celebrates everyday decision-making wins.<br>• Helps develop a plan for what to do when quick decisions need to be made. |
| **Understanding impact of others' decisions**<br><br>It's important to support the person to notice how other people's actions affect them. This might include decisions by family, services or friends. The person can then reflect, process, and make decisions about how they want to respond. | **The Circle:**<br><br>• Talks with the person about how others' actions affect them.<br>• Helps the person decide how they want to respond.<br>• Talks about things that feel unfair or confusing.<br>• Builds confidence in boundary-setting and speaking up. |
| **Sharing information with professionals**<br><br>Professionals often come and go. This step makes sure that information, context, and personal insight travels with the person. It prevents repetition, preserves the person's story, and promotes continuity of decision making<br><br>Professionals – particularly health professionals can work much better with people with disability when (a) the professional has access to relevant support plans in advance, and (b) the person has had a chance to become familiarised before an appointment. Circles can help with this flow of information. | **The Circle:**<br><br>• Makes sure professionals have access to helpful documents and insights.<br>• Ensures the person doesn't have to re-explain everything.<br>• Supports respectful, consistent handover.<br>• Keeps a record of what matters to the person.<br>• Shares relevant info with new workers (with consent). |
| **Reviewing and learning from decisions**<br><br>Reflection helps build confidence. This step involves looking at how things went after a decision has been made and the outcomes of the decision have had time to land. This helps the person grow their decision-making skills over time.<br><br>Did the supported decision making process work well? What didn't work?<br><br>Did the outcomes of the decision look or feel the way the person thought they would? | **The Circle:**<br><br>• Reflects with the person on the outcomes and impacts of decisions.<br>• Talks about what worked, what didn't, and what could change for next time in relation to:<br>• The way the decision making process was supported.<br>• The decision itself.<br>• Helps turn experiences into learning without shame. |

## Clarifying common misunderstandings about Circles

Circles are a fabulous way to help improve a person's quality of life. However, it can take a bit of time to understand how they work, how to fund them, and the different things they can do.

We will talk a bit more about planning, building and funding a Circle later in this guide. For now, here are some common misunderstandings about Circles and the reality of how they really work.

**COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING**
**Circles should be funded using NDIS Support Coordination line items.**

**REALITY**

When we talk about "funding Circles", we are almost always talking about funding the hours of a paid Circle facilitator. Facilitators bring specialist skills to work with a person to build and maintain a Circle that functions according to best practice.

While Support Coordination funds are sometimes received by a person with disability as part of their NDIS plan to coordinate supports and perform related functions, it is not accurate to equate the functions of Circles facilitation to that of a Support Coordinator. This is because:

- Support Coordinators connect a person with funded supports. This is not the key role of a Circles facilitator.
- You don't need to be an NDIS participant to have a Circle.

Some people who have a Circle of Support do not have or need Support Coordination in their plan. The work of a Circle facilitator is actually focused on:

a. ensuring a person-centred approach to planning and circle functions, and...

b. coordinating the natural supports (i.e. volunteer Circle members) in the person's life, to...

c. support the person to build their capacity and self-advocacy while reaching a range of goals.

**COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING**
**Funding Circle facilitation is akin to funding for Supported Decision Making.**

**REALITY**

Circles embody many of the key aspects of Supported Decision Making:

- A group of people who know the person well, hold the vision of a bright and empowered future for the person, and who collectively have a deep understanding of the person's identity, wants, needs and goals.
- A group of people who can engage with the person over time to build a clear picture of their will and preference in a range of domains, particularly if the person is an informal communicator.
- An environment which a person can be progressively introduced to, and experience, a broader range of options across several domains.
- An environment in which the person's everyday choices, lifestyle choices and long-term goals can be viewed in light of each other.

However, support to make decisions is not the primary function or outcome of the Circles model. Rather, Supported Decision Making is just one practice model that Circles use to achieve their broader outcomes.

In addition to Supported Decision Making, most Circles perform at least three or more clearly identifiable and measurable activities and outcomes. See **Goals, Functions and Outcomes** table below.

**COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING**
**Circles are person-centred and gloriously messy. We shouldn't expect them to fit a model. We should not expect goals or outcomes from them.**

**REALITY**

Circles are indeed person-centred and unique - but that doesn't mean they have no structure or purpose. In fact, person-centred practice works best when there's a clear process that supports the person's goals, communication style, and relationships.

Strong Circles have shared agreements, regular meetings, a facilitator, and a focus on mid-term goals that build toward the person's bigger dreams. This structure doesn't limit the Circle - it gives it strength, direction, and accountability.

Without goals, Circles can lose focus. Without structure, they risk fading away. The magic happens when Circles are flexible but grounded – shaped around the person, but still committed to real outcomes that matter in their life.

**COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING**
**You need to have 5 or 6 friends, family members, or close supporters ready to be part of a Circle before you start.**

**REALITY**

Some of the most powerful Circles begin with just the person and two or three other members. In fact, Circles can have their most profound impact with people experiencing deep isolation or complex support needs — not just those with large networks. A Circle can grow over time. With the right facilitation, even a small starting group can lay strong foundations and gradually draw in others who share a commitment to the person's life and goals.

Facilitators often help the person and their allies to map out relationships, explore community links, and invite people who bring new skills or perspectives. What matters most is the person's willingness to explore the idea and the support to build something meaningful, not the size of their current network.

## Circle levels: Different starting points, same purpose

Every person who has a Circle of Support started from a different place – some had strong connections, while others were rebuilding from deep isolation.

Circles can look very different depending on a person's relationships, needs, and stage of life. Some people already have strong networks. Others are just beginning to rebuild trust, connection, and a sense of direction—especially after trauma, injury, or isolation. This guide uses five levels of Circles to help people understand that there's no single way to start. You can read more about these in Inclusion Melbourne's original Circles of Support Guide. Each level is valid. Circles can shift between levels over time or stay in one level long-term. The key is that the Circle is built around the person, moves at their pace, and supports their goals, identity, and voice.

These Circle levels reflect the different stages and contexts in which Circles begin. Each level is valid. With the right facilitation, Circles can evolve, shift, or deepen over time – but they all have the same goal: to build genuine connection, capacity, and a better life for the person at the centre.

| Level | High level description | Best suited to | Resourcing |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emerging | One or two trusted people begin gently supporting connection and trust-building. May include paid supporters or allies. | People facing deep isolation, trauma, or profound disconnection from community and relationships. | May require substantial paid support, as well as assistance from community, to build connections and manage significant issues relating to health, communication, gatekeeping, or housing. |
| Foundation | Early-stage Circle. Often relies on facilitation to explore the person's identity and build new connections. May include some paid supporters. | People with mostly paid supporters or who are disconnected from family and community. | Facilitation (paid) time expectations (rough guide): **Start up:** 25 hours. **Ongoing:** 10 per meeting. |
| Building | A committed Circle of 5–10 unpaid members. Some know the person well. Others are just getting to know them. Mid-term goals are understood. | People with a few trusted connections and growing confidence to explore goals together. There may be some gaps in relationships, networks, agency or communication support. | Facilitation time expectations (rough guide): **Start up:** 15 hours. **Ongoing:** 8 per meeting. |
| Thrive | A committed Circle of 5–10 unpaid members. The person chairs or co-chairs Circle meetings. Goals are pursued actively. | People ready to deepen networks, work toward mid-term and long-term goals, and grow independence. | Facilitation time expectations (rough guide): **Start up:** 10 hours. **Ongoing:** 2–3 per meeting. |
| Microboard | The Circle functions like a governance group and (usually) becomes an incorporated body. The person is at the centre of strategic decisions with strong peer support. | People who may or may not already have a functioning Building or Thrive level Circle. They are seeking sustainable structures, formal responsibilities for Circle members, and (often) management of support funds by the Circle. | Visit **microboards.org.au** to learn more about Microboards. |

## What do we mean by outcomes?

**Circles of Support don't just make people feel included — they help things actually happen.**

Outcomes are the real-life changes that occur because a Circle exists. They might be social, practical, emotional, or deeply personal. And while no two Circles look the same, many lead to steady, meaningful progress in life areas that matter to the person.

Some outcomes:
- might have happened anyway — like attending a scheduled appointment.
- are more likely to succeed because of the Circle — like sticking with a goal, remembering next steps, or asking better questions.
- only happen because of the Circle — like reconnecting with a lost friend, or identifying an unmet need that no one else had noticed.

Some outcomes are easy to notice — like someone moving house or getting a job. But others are quieter and harder to measure, even though they're just as important. They build slowly through small actions that add up. Circles help create the **structure, memory and follow-through** that keep small steps on track — and that makes the difference between a good idea and a real change.

Examples include:
- A person starts to feel more confident and comfortable in their own skin.
- They gain clarity about what matters to them and what doesn't.
- They feel more in control of decisions — even if they still need help to make them.
- Their relationships start to feel safer or stronger.
- They begin to hold the people and services around them to a higher standard — and speak up when things aren't right.
- They reconnect with someone they had lost touch with.

- They begin to explore goals they had put aside or forgotten.
- They become more visible to others in their community — as a contributor, not just a recipient.
- They show increased interest in relationships, culture, belonging, or identity.
- They feel more hope, energy, or direction in their life.

These kinds of changes are deeply personal. They might not be tracked in formal assessments — but they often create the conditions for other, more measurable outcomes to take place.

They're also often fragile. Without continuity, encouragement, and time, they can fade. That's where Circles can be most powerful: noticing the small things that matter and helping the person build on them.

### Connecting Circles to the person's goals

Much of the funded disability support sector in Australia today is organised around a person's goals. This might be planned goals to which specific funding is roughly attached (like the NDIS) or goals that are part of support contracts (like some other insurance schemes). Support Plans – such as those most disability support providers are required to create with the people they support – must also have tailored goals. Circles can help create the conditions for goal progress in:

- **Personal goals** – things they want to do, try, experience, or understand better.
- **Goals identified in funded support plans** – developed in partnership with formal funders or coordinators.
- **Vocational or contribution goals** – relating to employment, volunteering, education, or building toward future roles.

Circles can:
- Incorporate the persons goals into the Circle's planning documents.
- Keep goals visible over time — especially when formal services change or drop away.

- Encourage follow-through, celebration, and small steps toward longer-term outcomes.
- Create gentle accountability: checking in without pressure.
- Help the person notice if their goals have shifted — and support them to update accordingly.
- Bring together people who can help activate progress in practical ways (e.g. visits, trials, introductions).

The Circle may not be there to own the goal or to replace funded supports. But it can be a powerful ally in making sure the person's goals don't sit forgotten in a file — they live and evolve in real life.

### Circles, rehabilitation, and recovery

For people with acquired brain injury, participating in — or leading — a Circle can offer more than just connection. It can act as a form of informal cognitive and social rehabilitation. Being supported to reflect, share, problem-solve, and receive feedback in a trusted group can support cognitive processes such as attention, memory and executive function, emotion regulation and confidence. Over time, this can enhance cognitive recovery, support the person's personal development, and improve overall quality of life. Whether soon after injury or many years later, the presence of a committed Circle can help the person navigate change and growth in a way that feels safe, supported, and grounded in real relationships.



> "Data from existing networks indicates that most individuals are achieving significant outcomes across a range of domains."
>
> *(Jay, 2018).*

> Circles can provide practical, freely given support to a person to make decisions and take actions on their housing arrangements. Microboards and Circles have been used to support people to move out of family homes
>
> *(Bigby & Araten-Bergman, 2018).*

> There are demonstrably positive changes in areas like employment, living arrangements, study and lifelong learning, volunteering, contributing to and leading their communities, life skills and health and fitness
>
> *(Jay, 2018).*

> "Circles of Support are seen as mechanisms that can enable and safeguard the individuals' rights to make decisions and choices about their own lives and support arrangements"
>
> *(Jay, 2018).*

## The Middle Principle — where Circles make the most difference

The idea of the "middle" is key to understanding where Circles work best — and why they're so important. When we talk about the middle, we mean more than just a space between services and friendships. There are many kinds of middle, and Circles can make a difference in all of them.

### The middle space: not formal, not informal

Circles sit between coordinated paid supports and uncoordinated natural supports. They don't replace either — but they can, as coordinated natural supports, hold the thread across changes in services or workers.

- They support follow-through and reflection between appointments and can offer gentle accountability and long-term focus.
- They can track things that others aren't tracking properly.
- They can help reconnect threads from the past.
- They may not meet daily or weekly, but they meet regularly – not just once or twice a year either.

### The person is in the middle

The Circle is not above or speaking on behalf of the person. It centres the person — not just in theory, but in action. The person's voice and preferences shape what happens.

### Mid-level risk and mid-level stakes

Some situations are high risk and need urgent or clinical intervention or support from advocates. Others are so low-risk and so clear that they can be left to paid supports or conversations outside Circle meetings. Circles, however, thrive in the mid-zone:

- When the person is facing decisions that are important, but not an emergency
- When the right timing, tone, or support could shift an outcome
- When something feels stuck — but doesn't yet qualify for formal escalation

If a person is in crisis, the Circle may not lead — but it can stay present, stop things slipping between cracks, and ensure strong relationships.

### Mid-level goals: where Circles shine

Some goals are short and simple. Others are long-term and complex. But many important goals sit in the middle — they take time, encouragement, and continuity.

Examples:

- Rebuilding a relationship
- Trying a new social role
- Exploring housing or job options
- Reconnecting with identity or values

These goals often need space to unfold. That's where Circles provide strength.

## More about mid-level goals

Not every goal can or should be addressed in a Circle of Support meeting. Some are too small and can be handled outside meetings. Others are too big or distant to act on immediately. But mid-level goals — the ones that sit in the middle — often work best. Some mid-level goals are about reaching a particular achievement, while others are stepping stones toward larger long-term goals. Other mid-level goals are about incorporating a new lifestyle choice into the person's rhythm of life.

Mid-level goals:

- Relate clearly to the person's current life
- Require action, discussion, or decision-making
- Are manageable steps that can be supported collaboratively

To the right is a table showing how a long-term goal can be broken into mid-level goals that suit Circle involvement, alongside smaller short-term tasks that might be handled outside the Circle.

| Goal Type | Example Goal | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Short-term task | Trang wants to update her resume with her support worker. | A clear, useful action, but doesn't require group support. Best handled outside Circle meetings. |
| Mid-level goal | Trang wants to explore new vocational options that align with her interests and energy levels post-injury. | This goal benefits from shared ideas, connections, encouragement, and ongoing reflection. It's actionable and suited to a Circle meeting. Circle members could review and provide some feedback for the first draft of Trang's updated resume. |
| Long-term goal | Trang wants to run a small catering business from home. | Currently too big for the Circle to tackle all at once. However, mid-level goals can form a pathway toward it. |

Mid-level goals are often the best use of Circle energy. They are meaningful and achievable, but not overwhelming. They also allow the person to take supported risks, explore possibilities, and build confidence with others alongside them.

**Tip:** Try breaking down long-term goals into smaller steps. Then, identify which of those steps would benefit from the input, networks, or shared thinking of the Circle.

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# Circles can achieve SO many things!

To people looking in from the outside, a Circle looks like a bunch of great people coming together around a person they care about. Circles are about belonging, talking together, building relationships and planning to meet goals.

However, Circles of Support can lead to many more benefits and outcomes. Circles can perform a range of functions just by being a great group of people with a clever facilitator. Some of these benefits, outcomes and functions are really amazing.

This lists on these pages can help you do one or more of the following:

- Understand the different ways that Circles could make life better for a person.
- Think about some of the ways a Circle might support the person to reach goals, build capacity, or navigate change.
- Identify potential outcomes that could be listed in a plan for building a Circle.

Not every Circle will achieve every outcome, but this list can help show how Circle facilitation may create meaningful value for the person at the centre – especially when linked to broader life goals or funded supports. Outcomes like these may be useful to include when writing a plan to request funding for Circle facilitation.

## Decision making

- Facilitation of Supported Decision Making (SDM) processes.
- Review and monitoring of supported or delegated decision arrangements, particularly if there are formal decision-making arrangements in place.
- Encouragement of confidence and self-expression in decisions and life choices.

- Practical modelling of rights-based, person-led decision-making.
- Support to prepare for and actively participate in formal planning and review processes.
- Promotion of autonomy through exploration of new choices and ideas.

## Tracking services and goals

- Facilitation of care team functions: information review and sharing, or enhancing effectiveness of care team meetings.
- Support to track goals, actions, and changing needs over time.
- Planning and coordination for major life transitions (e.g., housing, job changes, loss of a parent).
- Support to develop long-term planning goals (e.g., housing, relationships, succession).
- Effective review of service mix to ensure continuity, coherence, and follow-through across services, supports and plans.

## Communication and capacity building

- Support to strengthen expressive communication skills.
- Identification of the person's communication method, with support to grow the person's communication with use of visual, written, or AAC tools. (AAC means Augmentative and Assistive Communication).
- Skill development in reflective thinking, planning, and problem-solving.
- Enhanced confidence and leadership in group settings.

## Rights, Safeguarding and Advocacy

- Connection and strong engagement with formal advocacy services.
- Monitoring and safeguarding about concerns and risk of neglect, restriction or abuse.
- Oversight to identify and address poor service fit or

misaligned provider practices.
- Collective (but person-led) review of therapy, clinical or support recommendations to ensure alignment with the person's values and goals.
- Modelling and reinforcement of relational, respectful support practices across formal services.
- Challenging harmful practices (e.g., unethical restrictive interventions or exclusion).

## Housing, Living and Daily Life

- Exploration of housing options, including support to investigate independent or supported living.
- Planning for housing changes tied to family ageing, succession, or changing support needs.
- Support to locate a suitable housemate or shared housing arrangement.
- Help to clarify preferences around home environment, lifestyle, or living companions.

## Work, Study and Contribution

- Support to explore accurate, person-led vocational pathways.
- Effective identification of work, volunteer, or training opportunities, including support to implement a WOPMAT Report.
- Natural support to trial or develop a micro-enterprise.
- Revisiting paused or abandoned education or training goals.
- Encouragement and planning for contribution beyond paid work (e.g., community leadership, creative projects).

## Relationships and Social Connection

- Strengthening or rebuilding of key relationships (family, friends, past supports).
- Reduced isolation through regular social engagement.
- Facilitated development of new friendships or natural supports.

- Support in navigating, forming or sustaining romantic or intimate partnerships.

## Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

- Review and reflection on the quality and ethics of Behaviour Support Plans (BSPs).
- Identification of unmet needs or environmental factors that drive communication or actions labelled as concerning.
- Monitoring implementation of a Behaviour Support Plan to ensure it aligns with the person's strengths and values.
- Ensuring breadth and accuracy of a behaviour assessment or functional behaviour analysis.
- Providing person-led insights into what has helped or harmed in past support approaches.

## Identity, Culture and Personhood

- Support to explore identity, including culture, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and life roles.
- Support to navigate grief.
- Space for complex conversations that don't fit neatly into service systems.
- Respectful listening and validation of the person's narrative, past experiences, past poor service experiences, history, and future goals.

## Community and Civic Engagement

- Support to learn about politics and political parties in inclusive, accessible ways
- Support to prepare for elections, voting and civic opportunities using accessible information.
- Encouragement to enrol, vote, or participate in local democratic activities.
- Connection with mainstream peer groups, interest-based communities or public forums.

## Planning a Circle of Support

Every person is different and every Circle of Support looks different. No two Circles are the same. However, Circles that work well tend to share some key features. New members to a person's Circle will notice some of these straight away. Some take a little more time to understand. Some of them happen in the same order across Circles, while others come together in different ways.

This section outlines the foundational components of Circles and how to begin the process of building one.

## Key features of strong Circles

'Standard' is a difficult word in the world of Circles of Support. Circles are as different as the lives of the people around whom they are formed. However, Inclusion Melbourne and its partners from the National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards (www.cosam.org.au) have found that almost all Circles have some key features in common. These are:

The person's decisions are central to everything the Circle does

Circle members build a shared understanding of the person's goals and hopes

Carefully chosen members who have a range of experiences and connections

Space for the person to lead, reflect, and grow

A regular meeting pattern (e.g., every 6 weeks)

Clear, trusted, accountable facilitation

A goal-driven approach

A documented approach

Embedded Supported Decision Making practices

A strong set of guiding principles and values, including clear guidelines about how the Circle will run.

## Steps to building a Circle

This is not a checklist you must follow in a strict order. But most Circles include some version of the following steps. You can then read more about some of the steps on **pages 32–38**.

### 1. Consent and early planning

The person learns about Circles and makes it clear that they would like one. They are supported to explore what it might involve and begin some early planning.

### 2. Writing a Circle plan

A plan is developed to describe the Circle's purpose, the goals it will support, the facilitator's role, and the kinds of outcomes it may help enable.

Some Circle Plans will be written to submit to a funder to request funding for facilitation. Plans that are not written for this purpose may not need to follow the structure in this guide.

### 3. Preparing the Facilitator role

If a Facilitator is involved, their tasks during startup and ongoing monthly support are described in clear, practical terms. If the person chooses a key current supporter who has capacity to complete some Circle Facilitation training, then this is ideal. Otherwise, a supporter may need to help the person locate an appropriate Facilitator from outside the person's close relationships. This is OK – a good Facilitator does not need to be a current close connection.

### 4. Getting ready to invite members

The person (with support) identifies who might be invited, and how each person will be invited. This could look like:

a. Creating a relationship and community map: Identify who is already in the person's life, and who might be willing to be in the Circle. Work out a diverse list of people from different parts of the person's life.

b. Prepare members. Reach out to 5 or 6 people. Provide information on the purpose of the Circle and what the experience of being in a Circle will involve.

### 5. Plan the first meeting

Make it informal, welcoming, and centred around how the person wants it to run. The Facilitator should work closely with the person to plan this.

### 6. Hold the first meeting

a. Introductions.

b. Share ideas for goals, starting with the person's own thoughts. Run through some of the goals already present in the person's existing formal plans.

c. Discuss early ideas for Guiding Principles. The person and the Facilitator may have drafted some already using the general Guiding Principles outlined earlier in this guide.

### 7. Second meeting

a. Reflect on how the first meeting went.

b. Explore more goals.

c. Finalise or refine the Guiding Principles.

### 8. Establish a meeting rhythm

Set a meeting schedule and communication style that works for the person and the group.

### 9. Track progress and reflect on outcomes

Use meeting notes, shared goals, and reviews to stay aligned and keep things on track.

There are resources and fact sheets to accompany some of these steps at the COSAM website **www.cosam.org.au.**

cosam.org.au

## Consent and planning

Every Circle starts differently. Sometimes, the person has heard about Circles and reaches out to a supporter to ask for help to set one up. Other times, someone else introduces the person to the idea. Either way, the very first step is the same:

**The person needs to understand what a Circle is — and make it clear that they would like one.**

They might not decide straight away. They may need time to reflect, ask questions, or speak with people they trust. That's OK. Circles work best when they are truly chosen – not rushed or assumed.

The next step is **early planning**. Make sure things are written down to keep a log of the first ideas. This might include:

- Talking about what the Circle is for and what the person wants from it.
- Thinking about who might be involved, now or in the future.
- Deciding who will support the next steps — and whether a Facilitator is needed.
  - The model in this guide is based on a Facilitator-led Circle model, in line with insights gathered over many years of work in Circles.
- Beginning to reflect on what matters most to the person

This early planning doesn't need to be formal or perfect at the start — but it should be intentional.

## Writing a Circle plan

A **Circle Plan** explains what the Circle will do, how it will work, and how it fits with the person's life and goals. It's useful when preparing to invite members - and essential if applying for funding.

Plans can be flexible. They don't need to be perfect or formal straight away. But they should show:

- What the Circle is setting out to do
- Who is involved and why

- What support is involved and what the Facilitator will do
- What outcomes or changes the Circle may help bring about

They should be **measurable**. It needs to be clear 12 months later if the Circle has functioned according to the plan, has differed from the plan, has achieved some of the outcomes, or needs extra support or a re-writing of the plan. However, plans are not meant to force the Circle, the person, and its members to stick to a rigid process. They are there to provide a supportive map for the Circle. Changing course a few months after Circle meetings is completely fine, and having a clear Circle Plan can help the Circle think through why – and in what ways – it has collectively decided to do things differently.

A sample structure is outlined on the next page.

**Tip:** Even if you're not seeking funding right now, it's still worth writing down a clear plan. It helps build shared understanding — and gives the Circle something to grow from.

## Circle Plan: Sample template

The following three tables outline the key information to put in a Circle Plan, particularly if you are seeking funding for Circles Facilitation and need to show measurable details.

The main supporter who is supporting the initial development of the Circle should work with the focus person (the person with ABI) to develop this plan.

There are three tables below that outline the key measurable information relevant at the start of your Circle journey. You can add additional information to your Plan, however these tables will make it easier for coordinators and funders to get a clear picture of the structure and activities of the Circle.

No one can force a person to make their Circle look, feel or function in a way that the person does not want it to. Plans and goals are never 'locked in' – they can change when the person needs them too.

The aim of the Circle Plan template in this guide is to provide some guidance about the Circle's starting point – particularly for people who are new to the idea of Circles.

Key details + Facilitator tasks + Goal plan + Examples or other details

### Key details

| Circle part | Details | Guidance or Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Name | Trang | The person the Circle is being formed around. |
| Key supporters | I'm developing a Circle of Support with help from a friend, my mentor and my case manager. | List anyone helping develop this plan. |
| Consent / Initiation | I've read and talked about Circles of Support. I've decided I want to start one and I'm getting help to put things in place. | Make sure this reflects the person's active choice. Can name who is supporting. |
| Circle members | I've chosen a few people I'd like to invite. Some are from my family and others are from my community. I think I will be able to start my Circle with 5 members + me + my facilitator. | This may vary depending on the Circle's level — see **page 23**. |
| Facilitator | [Name] will help run my Circle. They'll support meetings, help follow up ideas, and make sure we stay focused on what matters to me. | If you already have a facilitator:<br>• note who this person is<br>• note roughly what they will do.<br>• If you don't know who the person will be:<br>• note what you would like a facilitator to do<br>• note ideas about how you will locate a facilitator |
| Facilitator qualifications (if funded) | They have relevant experience in disability, brain injury, or support coordination. They are good at listening, staying neutral, and keeping things moving. | This can help show suitability for facilitation funding. Use plain language to reflect relevant experience. |
| Meetings | We'll meet every 6 weeks in a relaxed way. I want the meetings to be informal, friendly, and include food. My friend [Name] has offered to host meetings for the first 12 months. Each meeting will go for 2 hours. | Include rough frequency, format and feel. |

**TRANG,**
early 30s

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Supported Decision Making steps and processes my Circle will help me with** | • Consent<br>• Support for Communication<br>• People in my Circle will help me talk through decisions<br>• Having different supporters for different decisions<br>• Building background knowledge that I need to make decisions<br>• Understanding how smaller goals lead to bigger goals<br>• Thinking through consequences and risk. | See the Supported Decision Making table on pages 18-21 of this guide. Add the first two steps – Consent and Support for Communication – to this row of the Plan. Then copy or adapt 5-10 more of the SDM steps or processes from the SDM table. |
| **Outcomes and functions the Circle will aim to support me to achieve** | • Facilitation of Supported Decision Making processes.<br>• Encouragement of confidence and self-expression in decisions and life choices.<br>• Practical modelling of rights-based, person-led decision-making.<br>• Support to prepare for and actively participate in formal planning and review processes.<br>• Support to develop long-term planning goals (e.g., housing, relationships, succession).<br>• Collective (but person-led) review of therapy, clinical or support recommendations to ensure alignment with the person's values and goals.<br>• Effective identification of work, volunteer, or training opportunities, including support to implement a WOPMAT Report.<br>• Support to navigate grief.<br>• Support to learn about politics and political parties in inclusive, accessible ways. | See the outcomes list on **pages 28–29**. Add the first outcome from this list to this row of the Plan – **Facilitation of Support Decision Making processes**. Work with the person to choose at least 5 more, then enter them on this row. |
| **Tools** | We will use:<br>• A shared OneDrive folder<br>• Microsoft Forms<br>• Email and text messages<br>• Communication cards with images to support communication during meetings.<br>• (Sometimes) easy language translations – the facilitator will use AI then review translations. | Outline some of the tools the Circle will use to run smoothly. There are some examples on the left. Some Circles and Microboards use Podio or similar apps. |
| **Guiding Principles and Sustainability** | My Circle will work on three documents during the first 6 months of meeting today:<br>• A Guiding Principles document<br>• A Sustainability plan<br>• An updated goal plan | Make a note, similar to the one on the left, that the person and the Circle will develop some rules. |

## Facilitator Tasks

If a facilitator is involved in the Circle, it is important to outline what they will be doing during the startup phase and throughout a typical year.

This table is an example of facilitator hours for a Building level Circle (see page 23 for more about different levels of Circle) that can be copied into a Circle Plan, especially when requesting facilitation funding. The time estimates are a guide only and should be tailored to the person, context, and capacity of the Circle.

### Startup

| Facilitator Task or Area | Details | Estimated Time |
|---|---|---|
| Meet with the person and key supporters to shape the plan | Build understanding of the person's goals and vision for the Circle | 2.5 hrs |
| Draft and revise the Circle Plan | Drafted and reviewed with the person | 3 hrs |
| Provide info or support to prospective members | May include calls, short meetings, or plain language handouts | 3.5 hrs |
| Prepare for first meeting (with person) | Includes:<br>clarifying person's preferences for meeting<br>logistics and agenda<br>invitations | 2 hrs |
| First meeting | Host and facilitate first meeting. Follow up post-meeting tasks. | 4 hrs |
| Startup activities – 2 month period | | Approx. 15 hours total |

## Ongoing support (annual)

| Facilitator Task or Area | Details | Estimated Time |
|---|---|---|
| Facilitate each Circle meeting | Includes prep, running the meeting, and follow-up | 4 hrs x 8 meetings |
| Support the person between meetings | Helping follow up, reflect, or shape next meeting | 1.5 hrs x 8 meetings |
| Circle relationships facilitation | Includes connecting with and coordinating circle members to facilitate a range of circle outcomes | 1.5 hrs x 8 meetings |
| Reporting and monitoring | Reviewing goals and progress, reporting to funders and relevant organisations in the person's network as appropriate | 6 hrs per year |
| General coordination | May include contact with services, family or advocacy | Approx 8 hours per year (varies) |
| Approximate annual ongoing support hours (after startup period) | | 70 hours per year |

## Goal Plan

This is all about matching goals and circle tasks to realistic timeframes.

This table is designed to show how the Circle can support the person's personal or formal goals — while being realistic about what's achievable early on.

It's not reasonable to expect a Circle to meet a wide range of robust outcomes in the first 12 months. The early stages are about forming strong relationships, planning together, and working toward a small number of clear and realistic outcomes. This table helps prioritise what's possible now — and what might come later, once the Circle has matured.

| Goal | Steps the reach the goal – agreed with the person | Formal supports already in place | How the Circle Will Help | What's Realistic When |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I want to build the skills and confidence to live more independently. | • Complete a housing readiness assessment with OT and Circle input<br>• Visit at least three different housing models and compare features using a structured checklist<br>• Develop a supported decision-making matrix outlining housing preferences, risks, and supports needed | • OT housing assessment<br>• Support Coordinator | • Assist in coordinating visits and tracking feedback<br>• Facilitate connections to others with lived experience<br>• Support decision-making conversations using tools and values statements, inviting support coordinator to some Circle meetings. | • 0–6 months: readiness work and site visits<br>• 6–12 months: decision-making and planning<br>• 1–3 years: transition if ready |
| I want to build work skills and move toward paid employment. | • Complete a skills and interests inventory to identify realistic employment pathways<br>• Enrol in and complete a structured, supported barista or hospitality course<br>• Complete two supported work placements | • DES provider<br>• TAFE course with adjustments<br>• Support workers | • Brainstorm appropriate training options and help evaluate fit<br>• Connect person to peers or mentors in hospitality<br>• Reflect on work trials: help problem-solve: workplace adjustments, reflect with Circle on fatigue, memory strategies, and support needs. | • 0–6 months: interest inventory and training<br>• 6–12 months: complete course and trials<br>• 1–2 years: employment or business pathway |
| I want to feel more confident socially and make more connections. | • Reconnect with two old friends through structured, facilitated catch-ups<br>• Identify and trial one peer-led community group with built-in sensory or communication accommodations<br>• Develop a weekly or monthly social calendar and practice planning and follow-through | • Recovery coach<br>• Support worker<br>• Community group leader | • Help plan and schedule social catch-ups and group visits<br>• Offer to accompany person to new evening or weekend activities<br>• Support reflection on what felt safe, positive, or overwhelming | • 0–6 months: reconnect and attend trial group<br>• 6–12 months: build routine and comfort<br>• 1–2 years: maintain social calendar independently |

## Examples or other details

You can add additional information to your plan, including:

- More information about the details in the first sections of your Plan
- Examples of the kind of key documents your Circles will use, such as meeting agenda or minutes templates, Guiding Principles documents, member invitations, sustainability strategies, and other guiding information.

## More about Facilitators

A Circle of Support needs someone to guide its formation and help keep it on track. This person is usually called the Facilitator. Some Facilitators are present long-term, while others are around for the first few years. Their role is vital.

They should be someone the person feels safe with - someone who can earn trust and help bring people together around a shared purpose.

The Facilitator should have:

- strong group coordination skills
- confidence in leading meetings
- the ability to manage follow-up tasks and documents
- excellent boundary-setting skills
- emotional maturity - they are not there to take over, speak for the person, or dominate the space
- strong knowledge of the Circle of Support model and know how to embed Supported Decision Making in their practice.

It is ideal that they have completed Circles of Support Facilitation training.

See **www.cosam.org.au** for fact sheets and resources:

- First meeting agenda
- Regular meeting agenda
- How to invite members
- What to do about paid staff in Circles
- Transitioning out of a CirclePerson Centred Planning

Circles of Support are a natural setting for person-centred planning. They offer a space for open discussion, reflection, and collaborative decision-making. Rather than separating planning from relationships, Circles bring the two together.

- Planning conversations can cover multiple domains in a person's life, such as:
- Home and living
- Work, education, or volunteering

- Health and wellbeing
- Relationships and community
- Safety, decision-making, and rights
- Interests, creativity, and spirituality

Circles can be used to host formal Person Centred Planning (PCP) sessions or to embed planning into regular meetings over time. Members bring unique insights, connections, and encouragement. Some Circles even use structured planning tools, such as vision templates or goal maps, to guide discussions. What matters most is that the planning reflects the person's values, preferences, and hopes - and that they are supported to lead.

When a Circle supports the development of a PCP, it can:

- Help clarify what matters most to the person
- Check if current supports align with goals
- Share responsibility for follow-up actions
- Reflect on what is working and what might need to change

Circles can also play an important role in preparing for formal planning meetings with funders or services. They can help ensure that goals are well-articulated and grounded in the person's will and preference.

### Problem Solving and Sustainability

Growing and sustaining a Circle of Support is a process that evolves over time. While many Circles develop rhythm and strength quickly, others may face challenges that require creativity, patience, and reflection. This is normal. Most Circles will move through ups and downs. Here are some common challenges and how to address them:

### 1. Conflict or disagreement within the Circle

- Revisit the Circle's shared purpose and values.
- Facilitator models, supports and drives respectful conversation.
- Keep the person with ABI at the centre — their wishes should guide decisions.

- Is the conflict about how best to support the person? If so, take the conversation offline and explore the concerns with care. Find out what each person is trying to protect or express.
- If the conflict is personal and unrelated to the person, the facilitator (upon discussion with the person) may need to ask someone to step back or resolve the issue outside the Circle.

### 2. Circle members lose momentum or disengage

- Be clear early on about member roles and expectations.
- Share wins and progress — this keeps people connected to the purpose.
- Use check-ins or informal contact between meetings.

### 3. The person's goals or needs change

- Circles should regularly review goals and make sure they still fit. Facilitators should have clearly documented plans and goal tracking notes that can be updated.
- Check in about consent after big changes in life, goals, or relationships. Does the person need a change in the Circle's rhythm? It's OK for Circle meetings to look a bit different for a while.

### 4. It's difficult to understand the person's communication

- Use consistent strategies and relationship-based observation. Seek external support as needed. However, it is vital that Circle meetings don't continue with work towards goals if the person's consent is no longer clear.
- Use supported decision making with a documented approach. The facilitator could have some smaller meetings with the person and 1 or 2 members at a time to build capacity in the areas of communication and supported decision making.

### 5. Circle feels stagnant or repetitive

- Facilitator should:
  - Identify the key moments or areas of discussion that

are driving the sense of repetition or stagnation.
  - Discuss these with the person: Do they also feel that something needs to change, or are they OK with the repetition? Do they need the repetition for a few meetings?
- Try different meeting formats (e.g. planning, celebration, mapping, time of day, weekday evening or weekend).
- Review whether current goals are still relevant or realistic.

### Monitoring and Review

Circles benefit from having simple ways to check in on how things are going. Regular reflection helps ensure that the Circle remains meaningful and responsive.

It helps to:

- Review individual and Circle goals every few months
- Reflect on what's working and what's not
- Adjust meeting frequency, structure, or membership as needed

This can be done using notes, visuals, or even just a shared conversation. It doesn't need to be complex — the key is consistency and inclusion.

### Sustaining a Circle

Some Circles last for decades. Others exist for a few years and then gently wind down. There is no single formula. But long-term sustainability is more likely when:

- Achievements are recognised and celebrated
- Ongoing facilitation is available, even part-time or voluntary
- New members are welcomed as others step back
- Communication stays open and adaptable

Circles don't need to last forever. But when they are well-supported, they often become a lasting source of identity, belonging, and possibility across the person's life stages.

## Circles as a cost-effective support

In both the short and long term, Circles allow for substantial added value, including savings in support costs that would otherwise require additional funds from a range of government or insurance programs – particularly in relation to costs often associated with case management, coordination, and implementation. In schemes such as the NDIS, Circles and similar models (such as Microboards) have prevented costly interventions that would have otherwise occurred in the mid-long term.

**Circles reduce the risk of:**

- Unbillable hours delivered by case management or support coordination professionals that become necessary due to:
  - unforeseen crises
  - quality issues associated with the person's services
  - positive behaviour support processes going pear-shaped
- Unnecessary costs incurred during crises due to poor pre-planning or preventative measures.
- Therapeutic interventions being ineffective or repeated due to poor preparation and triangulation with natural supports.
- Unnecessary guardianship arrangements.

**They also strengthen:**

- Quality and accuracy of assessments, reports, goal-setting, and goal articulation.
- Alignment and implementation of funded supports and goal-driven plans
- Engagement with community and social networks, thus ensuring strong support for mental wellbeing while navigating the recovery journey
- The communication journey, including building vocabulary, developing conversation skills, supporting people with communication access needs, and effectively building capacity in using AAC devices.
- Capacity to identify and communicate a person's will and preference in line with a range of Australian and Victorian decision-making guidelines.
- Self-advocacy and resilience, including building capacity to provide feedback about:
  - service quality
  - effectiveness of therapeutic interventions
  - issues related to everyday service matters like utility bills and rental accommodation

The following table outlines a range of the outcomes achieved by Circles that would require additional funding without a Circle:

| Outcome achieved with Circle | Similar outcome without a Circle |
| --- | --- |
| Careful, 360 degree, person centred review of consistency and quality of a person's support services. | These are often not performed by mainstream paid disability services unless covered by paid Support Coordination hours.<br><br>Issues relating to interface within and across NDIS service providers often result in additional funded (or unfunded) hours to manage errors, incidents or complaints. |
| Monitoring of facilitation of a range of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) and Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) functions leading to substantial savings, as well as prevention of common errors. Benefits include:<br>• Circle-led review of accuracy of behaviour assessments.<br>• Strong oversight implementation processes, such as delivery of training about the BSP to other supporters.<br>• High quality advocacy for the person at several steps of the process. | Coordinating the implementation of a BSP is currently a substantial and frequently cited gap in a range of disability related systems and programs. At present, a person with multiple paid providers will rarely be sufficiently engaged by a behaviour practitioner unless a paid support coordinator or other allied health professional coordinates the process. |
| Circles' foundational task/purpose is the drawing together of a range of close people in the person's life to:<br>• Ensure the person's deep relationships and connections are recognised and cultivated.<br>• Activate, coordinate and support those members to organically connect the person to new people and form new relationships. | Outside of the coordinated Circles approach, the work of strengthening relationships, enhancing interpersonal communication, and activating potential natural supports, is a slow, one-by-one process that is often poorly or insufficiently actioned by paid coordinators. Often this work is not viewed as a core role of case managers of coordinators, despite having a substantive impact on recovery outcomes.<br><br>In addition, connections are often ad hoc, cursory, inconsistent, and dependent on problem-solving support from long term paid supports that may disappear suddenly due to staff changes or turnover. |
| Circles can strongly complement the therapeutic or capacity building supports present in the person's life. With just a small amount of funding for the Circle Facilitator, Circle members can be empowered to:<br>• Build communication capacity.<br>• Contribute to the job-search journey for people seeking employment.<br>• Brainstorm ideas for – and provide support to try – recreational activities, new accommodation options, new educational activities, and new hobbies and skills.<br><br>This additional support would otherwise cost many thousands of dollars in support worker time. | Paid disability support professionals, case managers, and support coordinators can perform a range of paid tasks in relation to finding employment and education, locating new accommodation solutions, trying new activities, and building capacity in communication. However, these supports are often costly and only attract limited funding in most funded disability support schemes. |

# How to assess a funding request for Circle facilitation

Circles of Support are deeply personal, but they can—and should—be assessed against clear practice expectations. While every Circle looks different, this guide offers consistent, practical indicators of what a strong, well-supported Circle includes.

If you're reviewing a funding request, this double-page spread helps you:

- Identify the core planning components that matter
- Understand what funding is supporting
- Apply a clear, person-centred checklist grounded in best practice

These tools can support NDIA planners, TAC coordinators, brokerage administrators, and others who work at the interface of planning, funding, and system navigation.

## Circle Plan Table

Strong Circle requests don't need to be long or technical - but they should cover these components. Each one links to a section of this guide where you can find more detail or examples.

| Component | What it should contain | See Guide |
|---|---|---|
| Key Details | Describes consent, purpose, members, facilitator role, frequency, communication tools, functions and outcomes. | pp. 33–35 |
| Supported Decision Making steps | Shows how SDM will be embedded - ideally selecting 5–10 steps that the Circle can use and that suit the person | pp. 18–21 |
| Functions and Outcomes | Lists the intended Circle functions and outcomes that reflect the person's needs and context – ideally 5-10 | pp. 28–29 |
| Goals | Identifies how the Circle will contribute to the person's existing funded plan goals, as well as any vocational or personal goals not yet formally included | pp. 34–35 |
| Facilitator | Information about the Facilitator's relationship to the person, skills or qualifications, and Circles Facilitation training. Also lists the facilitator's startup and ongoing tasks, including estimated time commitments. | pp. 33–35 |

While some Circles are sustained entirely through informal efforts, research and the wisdom gathered over many years by Inclusion Melbourne's Community of Practice show that the most effective Circles have a dedicated, paid facilitation role. Funding this role—whether partially or fully—can make a critical difference in ensuring consistency, sustainability, and measurable outcomes.

Inclusion Melbourne and the National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards advise the ideal facilitation rate is equivalent to approximately $110 per hour. This allows for overheads and ensures appropriate expertise is committed to the role. It is also an appropriate rate for professionals who will be required to provide accountable progress reporting.

**Note:** For most people at the Emerging Level – and for many at the Foundation Level (see page 23) – there may be a need for additional professionals – such as clinical practitioners – to work alongside the facilitator and the person to do vital preliminary work (either before circle planning or in parallel) such as reviewing medication, speech pathology, psychology, or other work.

## What is funding actually supporting?

Funding should enable the Circle to function - not just as a series of meetings, but as a structured, values-based process that supports long-term connection, planning, and capacity-building. That said, facilitation funding will be used to perform a range of tasks that may usually be classified under other funding categories, depending on the funded support program.

| Area | What this includes |
|---|---|
| Facilitation | Coordination of meetings, logistics, communication, follow-up and documentation. Helping the person map relationships, invite members, and build the group's shared understanding. |
| Supported Decision Making | Providing consistent SDM support – both between the facilitator and the person, and activating a group of natural supports to provide broad SDM support. Embedding SDM steps tailored to the person's communication, identity and choices, while building the person's capacity to be an ongoing decision-maker. (see pp. 18–21) |
| Person Centred Planning | Facilitating Person Centred Planning processes. |
| Natural Supports | Coordinating, building, and maintaining natural supports (including support for relationships) |
| Positive Behaviour Support | Facilitators (and the Circle as a whole) often provide vital quality control for the behaviour assessment process, as well as driving efficiencies in BSP implementation. |
| Support to find employment | Circles can perform a substantive part of the work of preparing a person for work, finding work or placement options, and reviewing progress. |
| Capacity Building | Rather than having a range of separate paid staff supporting the person to building distinct skills 1:1, one at a time, at distinct times of the day or week, Circles can add substantive value in relation to skill development. |

## Circle Plan Review Checklist

This checklist can help confirm whether a Circle Plan or funding request reflects a structured, person-led Circle that aligns with the evidence and practice described in this guide.

| Check | ☑ |
|---|---|
| 1. Circle Plan or equivalent outlines the components in the Circle Plan Table above | ☐ |
| 2. Evidence of informed consent by the person with ABI | ☐ |
| 3. Outcomes list aligns with the person, their needs, and their goals | ☐ |
| 4. Listed goals are realistic and reflect the person's preferences and priorities | ☐ |
| 5. The relationship between goals, Circle tasks, and steps is clear and reasonable | ☐ |
| 6. Goal attainment timeline is appropriate and flexible | ☐ |
| 7. Required paid supports (e.g. recovery coach, support worker, therapy) are in place to complement the Circle plan | ☐ |
| 8. Facilitator tasks and proposed hours are clearly described and realistic | ☐ |
| 9. Facilitator time aligns with the Circle's level (e.g. Emerging, Foundation, Building, Thrive – see p. 23) | ☐ |
| 10. Meeting rhythm is appropriate (e.g. 90–120 minutes every 6–8 weeks; 5–8 members for Building/Thrive) | ☐ |
| 11. Facilitator has the skills and qualities to guide the Circle (see shaded box, p. 35) | ☐ |

## 6-12 Month Review

Use this table to review progress on Circle implementation after 6–12 months. This can assist with mid-cycle review, acquittal, or follow-up planning.

| Review Criteria | What to check for | ☑ |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Goal progress | Has the Circle supported progress on the goals listed in the Circle Plan? Have any goal steps been achieved, adjusted, or replaced? | ☐ |
| 2. Use of SDM steps | Has the Circle used Supported Decision-Making steps listed in the Circle Plan (see pp. 18–21)? Can examples be shown? | ☐ |
| 3. Outcomes progress | Is there evidence of progress toward the functions and outcomes listed in the Circle Plan (e.g. increased confidence, community connection, housing exploration)? | ☐ |
| 4. Delivery of facilitation hours | Has the facilitator delivered (or documented) the proposed hours and tasks outlined in the plan (see pp. 34–35)? | ☐ |
| 5. Meeting rhythm maintained | Has the Circle maintained a consistent meeting pattern (e.g. every 6–8 weeks)? Were meetings attended by a stable group of members, including the person with ABI? | ☐ |
| 6. Documentation and follow-up | Are there records of meetings, action items, and Circle reflections? Is there evidence of follow-through on agreed tasks and goals? | ☐ |
| 7. Emerging adjustments or learnings | Have any changes been made to Circle membership, goals, or facilitation? Have new needs emerged that require updated supports or plan revision? | ☐ |

## Communication, coping and behaviour support: how circles can help

### Communication about difficult experiences

Sometimes people act in ways that others find challenging, confusing, or unsafe. These are often called behaviours of concern — but more accurately, they are a form of communication. They may express pain, frustration, boredom, fear, protest, or a need that hasn't been heard or understood.

For people with acquired brain injury, this can be especially complex. ABI can change how someone copes, expresses themselves, or relates to others. It can affect memory, attention, impulse control, and mood. These changes can make daily life harder — not just for the person, but for those around them too.

But these challenges are never the whole story. A person with ABI is still the expert in their own life – their memories, relationships, values, and dreams. They deserve to be heard, supported, and understood — not judged or controlled.

### How Circles can help

Circles of Support can play an essential role in:

- Supporting communication and emotional expression
  - Helping the person name what's frustrating or confusing — or gently exploring when words are hard to find.
  - Encouraging supporters to listen beneath the surface of behaviours.
  - Supporting the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), like visual communication tools or communication devices.
  - Making space for the person to talk about stress, identity, or past trauma — or to set boundaries around what they don't want to share.

- Helping the person feel heard and less alone
  - Many behaviours arise when people feel ignored, boxed in, or unsupported.
  - Circles offer relational safety and consistency — reminding the person that they matter, and that change is possible.

### Bringing in allied health insights early

Circles can also help bring together insights from professionals who support communication, processing information, emotional regulation, and daily living - well before a formal behaviour support plan is needed. For people with ABI, support from allied health practitioners such as **neuropsychologists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists**, and **psychologists** can be vital. The person may decide to bring some of this professional guidance into the Circle – either through direct invitations to speak to the Circle by video call, by sharing assessments and letters, or even by an in person visit to part of a Circle meeting. These professionals might offer strategies for:

- understanding the person's sensory and environmental needs
- supporting memory, emotional regulation, or impulse control
- building communication tools or routines that reduce frustration
- addressing grief, trauma, or identity changes post-injury

By listening, adapting, and reflecting on this guidance, the Circle helps ensure that support feels consistent, coordinated, and relevant to the person's daily life — not just an isolated intervention.

### What if a Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) is needed?

If support from a behaviour specialist is needed, Circles can make a big difference in how that support works:

- Ensuring consent and inclusion, through checking:
  - Was the person fully informed about what a Behaviour Support Plan is — and did they agree to it?
  - Did key supporters and the Specialist Behaviour Support Practitioner fully explain the behaviour assessment and planning process to the person in ways they understood.
  - Was the person fully able to shape the plan's strategies and goals?
  - Does the person feel safe and in control during reviews or updates?
- Reviewing the work of a Specialist Behaviour Support Practitioner, through checking:
  - Did the practitioner meet the person and their trusted supporters in person?
  - Did the practitioner's assessment explore unmet needs, emotional wellbeing, autonomy, the person's home environment - or focus only on surface behaviour or the places where the communication and concerning actions take place?
  - Did the plan reflect the person's history, communication needs, and lived experience - or just what service providers said?

Circle members can spot red flags early. This includes vague goals, unnecessary restrictive practices, dodgy conclusions, missing voices, or poor language.

### Supporting implementation and follow-through

Even the best BSP won't help if it is inaccurate or not used well. Circles can:

- Check that people around the person know the plan and know how to follow it.
- Monitor whether strategies are actually being used, especially across different environments (e.g. home, community, support providers).
- Help keep implementation respectful and person-centred - not mechanical or controlling.

### Monitoring and review

- Circles can help schedule and attend BSP review meetings.
- They can keep track of what's working and what's not.
- They can support the person to speak up, ask for changes, or say "this doesn't feel right."

If the plan isn't working, or if the person's rights are at risk, Circle members can raise concerns with the practitioner, the agency that funded the behaviour practitioner, or the regulating body.

**Listening and Noticing**
- Circle members help the person feel heard
- Behaviour is understood as communication
- Stress, frustration, and needs are gently explored

**Strengthening Everyday Support**
- Small changes in daily support are tested
- Emotional regulation, routines, and communication ideas are shared
- Circles use insights from allied health professionals

**Formal Behaviour Support**
- Behaviour practitioner's interaction with the person is supported (with consent) by the Circle
- The Circle helps check quality and alignment of assessments and plans developed
- Circles support respectful implementation and review

# A closer look at Supported Decision Making

## Supported Decision Making in law and policy

This Guide to Circles of Support for people with ABI is based on a supported decision making (SDM) approach. SDM is not just a frontline practice. It's supported by law and recognised in key national and international frameworks.

- **The ALRC's National Decision-Making Principles**

  One of the most important legal shifts in Australia has come from the **Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC)**. In 2014, the ALRC proposed a new way of thinking about legal capacity and rights.

  The ALRC made four key recommendations that continue to shape practice and policy across Australia:

  - Everyone has the right to make decisions that affect their life – and for those decisions to be respected.
  - Substantive, carefully planned support must be provided before substitute decision making is considered.
  - Will, preferences, and rights – not "best interests" – should guide decision making.
  - Any limitations on legal capacity should be minimal, subject to review, and based on the person's rights. Limitations should only apply to specific areas of life in which will and preference can not be determined. Limitations to one area of life do not automatically apply to other areas of a person's life.

  These principles are echoed in **Guardianship laws, human rights charters, and service frameworks** across Australia. They are also central to this guide.

The **NDIS Supported Decision Making Policy** (2023) outlines what is expected from NDIA staff, the NDIS Commission, and the broader NDIS. It is grounded in the ALRC Decision-Making Principles (2014) and emphasises:

- Participants should be supported to explore options, change their mind, and learn through decision making.
- Informal supporters, family members, and peers play a critical role.
- Substitute decision making should only be used when all other options have been exhausted.

- The **NDIS Practice Standards** also include requirements to support decision making, including:

  - Helping participants understand and make informed choices about their supports and their broader life.
  - Supporting dignity of risk.
  - Respecting diverse identities and communication styles.

## Supported Decision Making models

In Australia, there are many models and resources that help explain how supported decision making can work in practice. These resources don't all use the same language or structure, but most of them are based on the same values: rights, relationships, and communication.

The following is a quick overview of some of the major SDM resources in Australia. Some are toolkits, some are training programs, and some are policy statements. The aim is to show what's already out there – and to place Circles of Support within this broader picture.

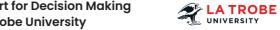### It's My Choice! – Inclusion Melbourne and RMIT University

inclusionmelbourne.org.au/choice

Developed by Inclusion Melbourne and RMIT University, this model focuses on helping people understand and achieve their everyday needs, lifestyle goals, and long-term vision.

- It introduces the idea of Everyday, Lifestyle, and Pervasive (big picture) decisions.
- It offers a toolkit to help the person and their supporters work through changes in motivation, identity, or decision-making ability.

### Support for Decision Making – La Trobe University

www.supportfordecisionmakingresource.com.au

This is an online training resource that explains supported decision making using videos and real-life examples.

- It explains how supporters can recognise and strengthen a person's decision-making capability.
- It includes planning tools, case studies, and reflective practice guidance.

### Supported Decision Making Online Resources– WA's Individualised Services (WAIS)

waindividualisedservices.org.au/supported-decision-making-resources/

This is a well-known resource for services looking to embed supported decision making into everyday practice.

- It includes practice advice, organisational planning tips, and stories from people with disability and their supporters.
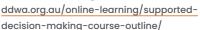
### Deciding with Support – Flinders University

https://decidingwithsupport.flinders.edu.au/

This resource supports people with disability to be involved in decisions about their Behaviour Support Plans (BSPs).

- It introduces the basics of supported decision making and then explores how to apply these ideas in the context of behaviour support.
- It includes tips, examples, and Easy Read information for people with disability.

### DDWA Supported Decision Making Online Learning Resource

ddwa.org.au/online-learning/supported-decision-making-course-outline/

Developmental Disability Western Australia provides an online learning program on SDM.

- It includes two short video modules designed for parents, families, support workers, coordinators, and allied health professionals.
- Module 1 covers foundational skills and values. Module 2 focuses on planning and practical strategies.

### Supported Decision Making Resources – Inclusion Australia

www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/topic/supported-decision-making/

Inclusion Australia has developed a range of guidance documents, tools, and websites about SDM. Inclusion Australia is the national peak for self-advocacy and systemic advocacy for people with intellectual disability.

Many of the key ideas from these models and tools are reflected throughout this guide. For example, the step-by-step framework on pages 18–21 brings together many of the elements found across these resources.

## Circles of Support bring Supported Decision Making to life!

Circles of Support represent a unique embodiment of the key principles of Supported Decision Making in that, by default, they:

- Bring together a range of people who are close to the person, who know the person well and care for them.
- Bring together people with diverse perspectives, skills, experience, and social and professional connections. These members commit to leverage these factors so that the Circle can:
  - expand the person's range of options
  - ensure engagement across a range of life domains
  - seek leads for employment, home/living arrangements, recreation, and various areas of capacity building.
- Create a safe environment in which several aspects of choice can be explored over time, including 'in the moment' instances of 'choosing between' that may be required in a short time frame, as well as staggered decision-making processes or processes that require a long-term approach to helping a person work out their will and preference.
- Ensure a strong group of close people for the purpose of participating in, or reviewing, key person-centred planning processes, such as support planning, Behaviour Support Plan development and review, and long-term planning.
- Create a continuous point of engagement regarding the person's goals, key relationships, ongoing supports, and citizenship (including learning about sexuality, relationships, politics, culture, faith and civil society), as well as the relationship between everyday, lifestyle and long-term choices or goals.

## Guarding against substitute decision making

Circles of Support include built-in safeguards that help prevent substitute decision making and promote authentic supported decision making.

When Circles are resourced and facilitated well, they foster a shared culture where members act in line with the person's will and preference – not on their behalf. In particular:

- **Relationship-based determination of will and preference** For some people with complex communication access needs, it may not be possible to fully enact a supported decision-making process for every decision – especially where technical knowledge is required to make the decision, or when urgent timelines apply. In these cases, trusted supporters may draw on deep, relationship-based knowledge to guide decisions that reflect the person's likely preferences. This approach is recognised across leading SDM models. Safeguards include:
  - Checking in with the person about any preferences they can express
  - Observing their engagement and reactions over time
  - Reviewing decisions to confirm they align with the person's evolving wishes

- **Supported decision making and delegation** People with disability have the right to step back from decisions they don't want or need to make. Delegation is not substitute decision making – it's a valid and supported element of SDM practice. This process involves:
  - Helping the person understand the range of decisions in their life
  - Supporting them to decide which ones matter to them, and which they'd prefer to delegate

- Identifying who they trust to make those delegated decisions – whether it's the full Circle, specific members, or others in their network. Supporting delegation requires significant time, care, and skill – particularly for people with severe or profound cognitive disability. This is especially true when decisions involve abstract or technical topics, like financial management, contract terms, or commercial arrangements.

# Further reading and support

These organisations and resources may be useful if you want to learn more about acquired brain injury, support, or Circles of Support.

## Acquired Brain Injury

**Brain Injury Australia (BIA)**: The central clearinghouse of information and gateway to nationwide referral for optimising the social and economic participation of all Australians living with brain injury.
www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au

**Synapse**: A not-for-profit organisation offering a range of support services, including information, coordination, advocacy, and targeted research activities for Australians impacted by brain injury and disability.
www.synapse.org.au

**Brain Injury Matters (BIM)**: Brain Injury Matters (BIM) is a self-advocacy and community education organisation run by and for people with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI).
www.braininjurymatters.org

**Interact-ABI-lity Training**: The world's only self-guided communication partner training program to cover different communication changes that happen after brain injury. Communication partner training is an internationally recommended best practice for brain injury rehabilitation.
www.bit.ly/interact-ABI-lity

## Circles of Support and Microboards

**Diversity and Disability Alliance (DDA)**: A user-led organisation supporting people with disability from diverse backgrounds. DDA offers resources and assistance in establishing Circles of Support.
www.ddalliance.org.au/circle-of-support

**National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards (COSAM)**: Provides information, training, and resources on establishing and maintaining Circles of Support and Microboards.
cosam.org.au/information

Contact **projects@inclusiondesignlab.org.au** for more information.

**Microboards Australia**: Supports the development of Microboards – incorporated Circles of Support with a strong conceptual foundation – and delivers support and training in Positive Behaviour Support and communication support.
www.microboards.org.au

**Hunter Circles**: A Newcastle-based grassroots organisation committed to community connection, Circles of Support, and social justice. Strong experience working with people experiencing profound isolation.
www.huntercircles.org

**Belonging Matters**: Offers training and stories about Circles and Microboards, focusing on community inclusion.
www.belongingmatters.org/building-community-networks

## Other resources

**Office of the Public Advocate (Victoria)**: Provides resources and tools for supporting decision-making for people with disabilities. See OPA's resources about Supported Decision Making, Guardianship, and acquired brain injury.
www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/your-rights

**Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (DARU)**: DARU is a Victorian organisation dedicated to working with disability advocacy organisations to promote and protect the rights of people with disability.
www.daru.org.au

**Disability Gateway - Supported Decision Making Hub**: SDM hub at the Australian Government's online Disability Gateway.
www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/sdmhub

This guide is a living resource. It is informed by people with ABI, their families, and the organisations that walk alongside them. As Circles grow, learn, and evolve, so too will the practices that support them.

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