



Simplicity Matters Earth Institute

www.simplicity-matters.org
Simple living for a sustainable future

Why Discussion Circles?

This document, with live links, can be found at
www.simplicity-matters.org/circles/faq/whycircles.pdf

What's special about discussion circles?

The circle experience is unique. Magic happens when circle members read the same text or watch the same video and then come together to discuss them. In a circle you commit to learning together with 8-12 other people who meet 7 times on average. You enjoy a deep and meaningful conversation about the topic at hand with lots of personal stories. Participants invariably report that they were greatly enriched from the sharing of experiences, ideas, and advice. Circle members provide a support system that enables participants to make actual changes in their lives (if that is what they want; there's never any pressure). In sum, our discussion circles provide a safe environment for the exploration of lifestyle changes that support our living more lightly on Earth. Whether you're reading one of the NWEI discussion guides or jointly discussing videos or topics of your own group's choosing, discussing these subjects within a group will be a far richer experience than you could have on your own.

Is there a larger community?

There is definitely a larger community! Simplicity Matters Earth Institute (SMEI) is part of the North American Earth Institute Network, composed of volunteers who have offered discussion circles based on materials produced by the [Northwest Earth Institute](#) to more than 85,000 participants in all 50 states, DC, Canada, Sweden, and New Zealand.

Since SMEI began operating in 2002 our volunteers have started and supported more than 170 discussion circles in Washington, DC, in twelve counties in Maryland, and in West Virginia. The [Chesapeake Earth Institute](#), our sister organization, starts circles in Virginia.

You can access the larger community in several ways. A monthly gathering held in Bethesda (Second Sunday Forum) focuses on different aspects of living more lightly, as does the Baltimore Green Forum (see our [home page](#) for details).

We support four online communities on yahoogroups: [DCMetroSimplifiers](#), [FoodPassionESA](#), [AGreenerHome](#), and [GreenCityBaltimore](#).

Our [monthly announcement](#) lets you know about SMEI events and those hosted by other organizations.

SMEI organizes an annual picnic each June, when circle members from all over the state congregate in a lovely outdoor location (varies each year), and a Winter Solstice celebration.

How do discussion circles work?

Circles are peer-facilitated. There is no teacher, no preacher, and no expert. You will learn from self-reflection and through discussion with others. Circle members create their own learning experiences: no two circles are the same, even when they read the exact same text. The meetings work like this:

Introductory Meeting: You and others who may be interested in joining the circle come together to learn more, with no obligation to join. A SMEI volunteer helps you figure out what you wish to do together, and when and where you'll be holding your regular meetings. On our website: [How to find an intro meeting](#). Between this meeting and the next, you will have read the first chapter of the discussion guide.

First Meeting: If possible, a SMEI volunteer attends and models procedures that have been tested and shown to work (described below). Circle members take turns leading subsequent meetings.

Other Meetings: Every meeting includes an opening, a peer-facilitated discussion, and (often) action items.

The **opening** involves sharing of a personal experience relevant to the subject to be discussed.

The **facilitator** is a participant whose job is to ensure that the conversation flows smoothly. He or she encourages everyone's participation and keeps the discussion personal, focused, and balanced among the participants. Text-based guides provide suggested discussion questions, and/or circles can pose and respond to their own questions. There are no "right" and "wrong" answers. The idea is to share personal points of view in a climate that is safe and non-judgmental. Circle discussions are kept confidential among circle members.

If a circle decides it wants to explore practical applications of what they discuss, they implement **action items**. At the end of every meeting each participant commits to doing one small action. At their next meeting everyone reports on their progress.

Final Meeting (Wrap-Up): A SMEI volunteer offers support throughout the process (if needed). He or she returns at the last session to help group members evaluate their experience and decide their next steps. Many circles choose a [new activity](#) on which to embark together, and commit to another series of meetings. Some circles have been meeting for years!