

Appearances Aside - A Talking Circle from Life Transition Services

By **Kathryn Kaplan and Karen Merson**

What is it like to participate in a Talking Circle?

Imagine being greeted warmly by trained facilitators and entering a room that is well-lit and organized with name tags, water and snacks. Learning objectives are clarified at the beginning so that participants know what to expect.



The Appearances Aside Talking Circle focused on clarifying values and choices, expanding perspectives, and reflecting on self-acceptance. In addition guidelines were established to encourage productive conversations, such as making sure everyone had a chance to speak, sharing but not advising, and respecting different individual choices.

Everyone was eager to explore how they felt about their looks and changes in their aging bodies. The two facilitators set the stage for the conversation and then led the group through a series of questions.

You might wonder why the women chose to come to this session. Well we were curious too and that was the first question. One by one the answers included:

- Wanting to be sure her appearance was authentic and reflected vitality
- Not wanting to compete with women 30 years old, and accepting her thighs!
- Sad to go to a special party of people she hadn't seen for a long time and did not feel she would look good
- Afraid no man will want her when he sees her scars
- Feeling fat
- Scared to end up alone
- Not wanting to be a stereotype, instead wanting to feel alive

You can see the women were honest and willing to share their feelings even when they didn't know each other. Creating an emotionally safe environment contributed to a level of sharing that's not superficial or judgmental.



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In framing the second question, the facilitators asked participants to consider a continuum of self-acceptance: one end is being in denial about one's appearance and the other end is being resigned to the changes. It was noted that self-acceptance is a spiral process, not a once and for all event. The women appreciated having a context for reflecting on what they both accepted and didn't accept about themselves. Themes ranged from the women comparing themselves to an ideal reflected in the media and advertising (though external criterion) to the theme of recognizing that they don't see themselves as others see them. One woman keeps pictures of older women who inspire her on her bulletin board.

The two hours allotted were hardly enough, and at the end of the session interest was expressed for a follow-up workshop. A workshop would enable a smaller group of women to take a deep dive to examine their individual and collective perceptions, fears, intentions, and resources. The talking circle experience is designed to be fun, engaging, meaningful, and empowering. What did the women say they found most beneficial from the session? The camaraderie, sharing similar feelings, hearing common concerns, and feeling safe to talk and listen. The facilitators loved their enthusiasm, honesty, and ideas for greater self-acceptance.

While every talking circle is different, the opportunity to learn from other women and realize you are not alone is a consistent gift. We encourage you to check out the list of upcoming talking circles and see if there is one that peaks your interest.

The Life Transition Services (LTS) team welcomes your suggestions for additional topics to explore in the fall. And invites members interested in facilitating talking circles or workshops to contact the LTS Committee Chair Eileen Kobrin eileenkobrin@gmail.com.