



Pilot Program Impact Report

GPS Circles of Connection for the Jewish Community



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“I feel like I've been waiting for months to find a space like this. It felt like a relief to speak freely and to hear from folks experiencing similar feelings.”

— Circles of Connection Participant

On October 7, 2023, Hamas infiltrated Israel from the Gaza Strip, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,200 Israelis and the taking of 240 hostages. Those attacks and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war resulted in dramatic increases of antisemitism globally. The emotional impact of these events has been far-reaching and is significantly affecting the lives of Jewish people in Greater Boston.

In response, GPS Group Peer Support (GPS) launched GPS Circles of Connection for the Jewish Community (Circles of Connection), a pilot program designed to mitigate the stress, anxiety, and trauma experienced by Jews due to intense post-10/7 stressors. The pilot was implemented in partnership with Jewish Family & Children's Service of Greater Boston (JF&CS) and JCC Greater Boston (JCC). It was funded by The Beker Foundation, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP)'s Center for Combating Antisemitism, The Ruderman Family Foundation, and other foundation partners across Boston.

Circles of Connection provided participants with a free group-based support session, known as a circle, based on the GPS model. GPS is a mental wellness intervention that mitigates the long-term effects of stress, strain, and trauma. Incorporating elements of mindfulness-based stress reduction, cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing, peer-to-peer support, psychosocial education, and other evidence-based modalities, GPS is designed for the rapid implementation of essential mental health support during times of stress, crisis, and change.

Almost all (97%) Circles of Connection participants said that they would recommend Circles of Connection to their peers. The same percentage said the circles were Excellent/Good. An overwhelming majority (82%) of participants want to attend future circles. Significantly, over half of participants (55%) expressed interest in being trained as a Circles of Connection facilitator so they can bring the program to their communities.

In focus group feedback and open response survey questions, participants said that Circles of Connection guidelines were essential to creating a sense of safety and community. This, in turn, supported participants in sharing deeply personal experiences during the circles.

Social support is a crucial ingredient for both physical and emotional well-being. Circles of Connection provided an opportunity for Jews to share deeply personal struggles with others experiencing similar challenges post-October 7. By sharing their struggles with others, they broke through isolation and increased their ability to integrate their trauma in a cohesive self-narrative of resilience, self-efficacy, and hope for the future.

BACKGROUND

Greater Boston-based Jewish leaders report post-10/7 suffering in the Jewish community

On October 7, 2023, Hamas infiltrated Israel from the Gaza Strip, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,200 Israelis and the taking of 240 hostages. The attacks included widespread use of torture and sexual assault as tools of terror. Those attacks and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war resulted in dramatic increases of antisemitism globally.

An analysis of political discourse following the October 7 attacks by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which tracks political extremism, found a disturbing convergence among far-left, far-right, and Islamist ideologies around shared antisemitic conspiracy theories.¹ Numerous college campuses were home to demonstrations and encampments critical of Israel and calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. At times, this activism blurred the line between criticism of Israeli policies and outright antisemitism.² Many Jewish students reported experiencing increased instances of antisemitic insults, harassment, and seeing antisemitic images and graffiti in the wake of this activism, with most of the antisemitic hostility coming from other students.³

The emotional impact of the October 7 attacks and the Israel-Hamas war has been far-reaching. The PEW Research Center found that, “[a]n overwhelming majority of U.S. adults (83%) say that hearing or reading news about the Israel-Hamas war makes them feel sad, and about two-thirds (65%) say news about the war makes them feel angry.”⁴

For Jewish Americans, these emotional impacts have been exacerbated by direct experiences of antisemitism. Interviews of Jewish Americans by Hadassah Magazine found that “the surge in antisemitism has become a very real, very personal mental health issue.”⁵



¹ Cross-ideological antisemitism and the October 7th attacks. ISD. (2023, December 15). https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/cross-ideological-antisemitism-and-the-october-7-th-attacks/

² Wright, G. W., Volodarsky, S., Hecht, S., & Saxe, L. (2023, December). In the Shadow of War: Hotspots of Antisemitism on US College Campuses. Research portal. <https://doi.org/10.48617/rpt.1072>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alper, B. A. (2024, April 2). How U.S. Jews Are Experiencing the Israel-Hamas War. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-jews-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war/>

⁵ Danailova, H. (2024, June 6). The Psychological Impact of the Rise of Antisemitism. Hadassah Magazine. <https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2024/05/23/the-psychological-impact-of-the-rise-of-antisemitism/>

Greater Boston is home to the fourth-largest population of Jews in the United States.⁶ During GPS interviews with more than 20 Greater Boston-based rabbis, leaders of Jewish organizations, synagogue directors, and Jewish clinicians, educators, mediators, and community organizers a persistent theme of post-10/7 suffering emerged.

“All of my peers have said this is the hardest year they can remember.”

— Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

As is the case for Jews throughout the country, much of this suffering is directly related to antisemitism. Many Jews in the Greater Boston area have direct connections to family and friends living in Israel and experience intergenerational trauma related to the Holocaust and centuries of antisemitism rooted in various ideological and religious movements.

Crucially, some of this suffering is not related to direct experiences with antisemitism. Many Jews are experiencing anticipatory fear that they will experience antisemitism and have made changes to their daily routines in attempts to avoid it. For some, it is also possible that they may be misinterpreting otherwise benign acts as antisemitism due to the activation and fear they are experiencing.

Concurrent to all of this, the very fabric of Jewish life has been completely disrupted. Post-10/7 politics have “intensified” long-standing divides among Jews about the state of Israel and younger Jews are “breaking from their parents and grandparents in regard to internalized assumptions about [Israel].”⁷

All of these conditions have created a perfect storm of trauma that is significantly affecting the lives of Jewish people in Greater Boston.

“The Jewish people are in so much pain, so frightened. A lot of people are feeling shame, and we’re turning against each other rather than toward each other,” said Rabbi Sharon Anisfeld, President of Hebrew College, during her Circles of Connection interview, when reflecting on the situation faced by the Greater Boston Jewish community.

“I think everyone in the Jewish world is feeling really hurt,” added Meir Lakein, Co-Executive Director at Jewish Organizing Institute & Network, during his interview. “Everyone is recognizing that they don’t have as much power as they thought they did. And people who are really hurt, and suddenly feeling really powerless, aren’t really set up to make really good decisions.”

“Everyone is recognizing that they don’t have as much power as they thought they did.”

— Meir Lakein

Rabbi Suzie Jacobson, Rabbi and Director of Congregational Learning at Temple Israel Boston shared in her interview that there is a need to be able to have “hard conversations,” but they have been hard to organize, much less facilitate. “Ideally, I would like to be in a position where I could sit inside the tent and be facilitating and leading or educating,” Rabbi Jacobson said. “But instead I feel like I’ve been hanging out on the tent poles trying to convince people not to leave. And it’s been challenging.”

⁶ Aronson, J.K., Boxer, M., Brookner, M., Saxe, L. 2015 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study. (November 2016). Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/community-studies/boston-report.html>

⁷ Dollinger, M. For American Jews, the six months since Oct. 7 have intensified what already divided us. April 5, 2024. Jewish News of Northern California. <https://jweekly.com/2024/04/05/for-american-jews-the-six-months-since-oct-7-have-intensified-what-already-divided-us/>



Jewish Community Response

One week after the October 7 attack on Israel, philanthropists in Greater Boston's Jewish community approached GPS to develop an initiative to bring mental wellness support to the region's Jewish community. GPS partnered with Jewish Family & Children's Service of Greater Boston and JCC Greater Boston to design and implement a pilot program that could be brought to parents of, and educators working with, children in early childhood programs and Jewish day schools, synagogues of all denominations, Hillels at Greater Boston colleges, Jewish educational programs, and Jewish individuals and communities who might not be affiliated with any institution.

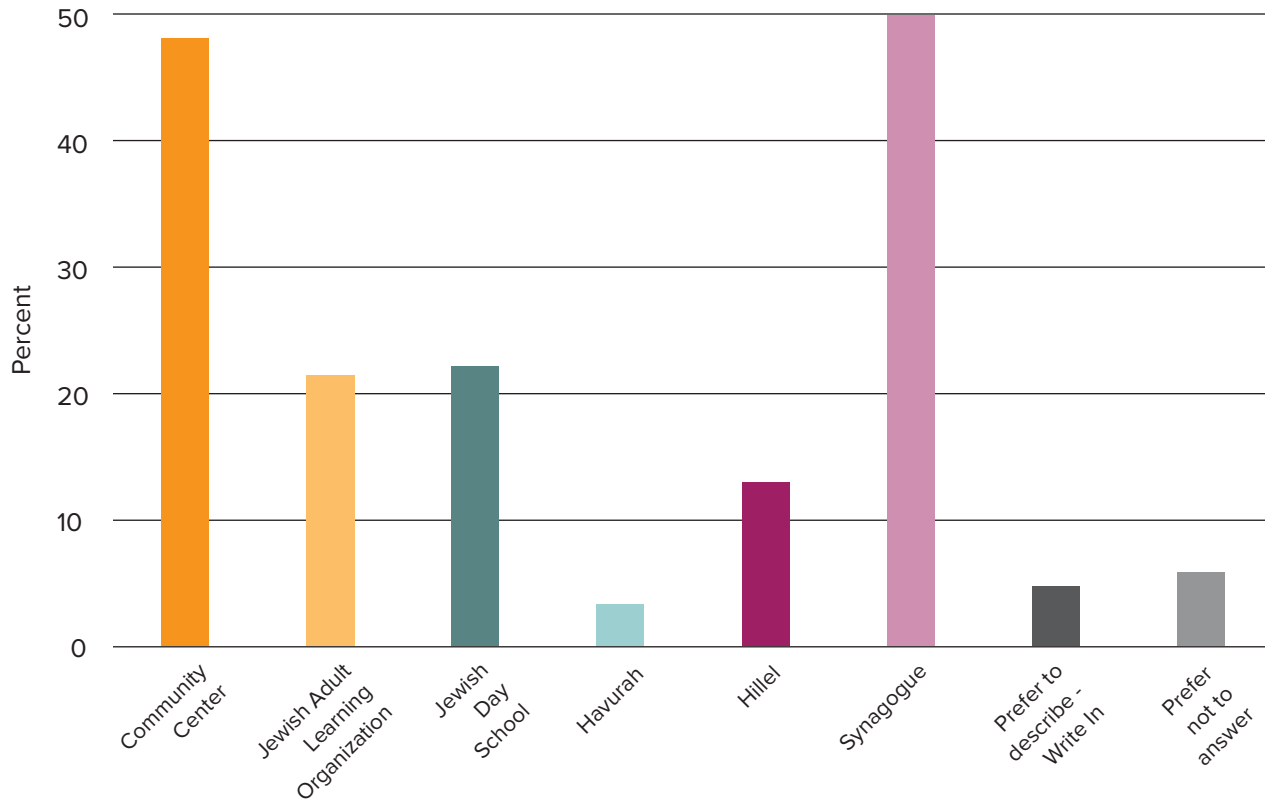
The pilot launched in June and ran through July of 2024, with circles open to six specific populations in the greater Boston area: LGBTQIA+ Jews, Jewish college students, parents of Jewish college students, Orthodox Jews, Jewish professionals, and Israelis. A seventh circle was offered as an open group, available to any Jewish person interested in attending, regardless of particular identities or affiliations. Sessions took place via Zoom, were 90 minutes long, and led by GPS-trained facilitators.

Each circle used the culturally-responsive curriculum for the Jewish community co-created by GPS and its Jewish partner organizations. The Circles of Connection curriculum is based on GPS's core model, which includes guidelines for creating a trauma-informed space that allows participants the opportunity to engage in deep and meaningful group experience. For Circles of Connection, guidelines were adapted with Jewish communication styles in mind, incorporating the Jewish concepts of Lashon Hara (speech that causes harm), Derech Eretz (behaving in a respectful way), healing trauma through the lens of L'dor V'dor (from generation to generation), and Chesed (kindness), as a way to better understand the goals of Circles of Connection.

Participants were recruited via Jewish organizational email lists and social media as well as informational flyers that were made available at Jewish organization events and included in organizational resources for the community.

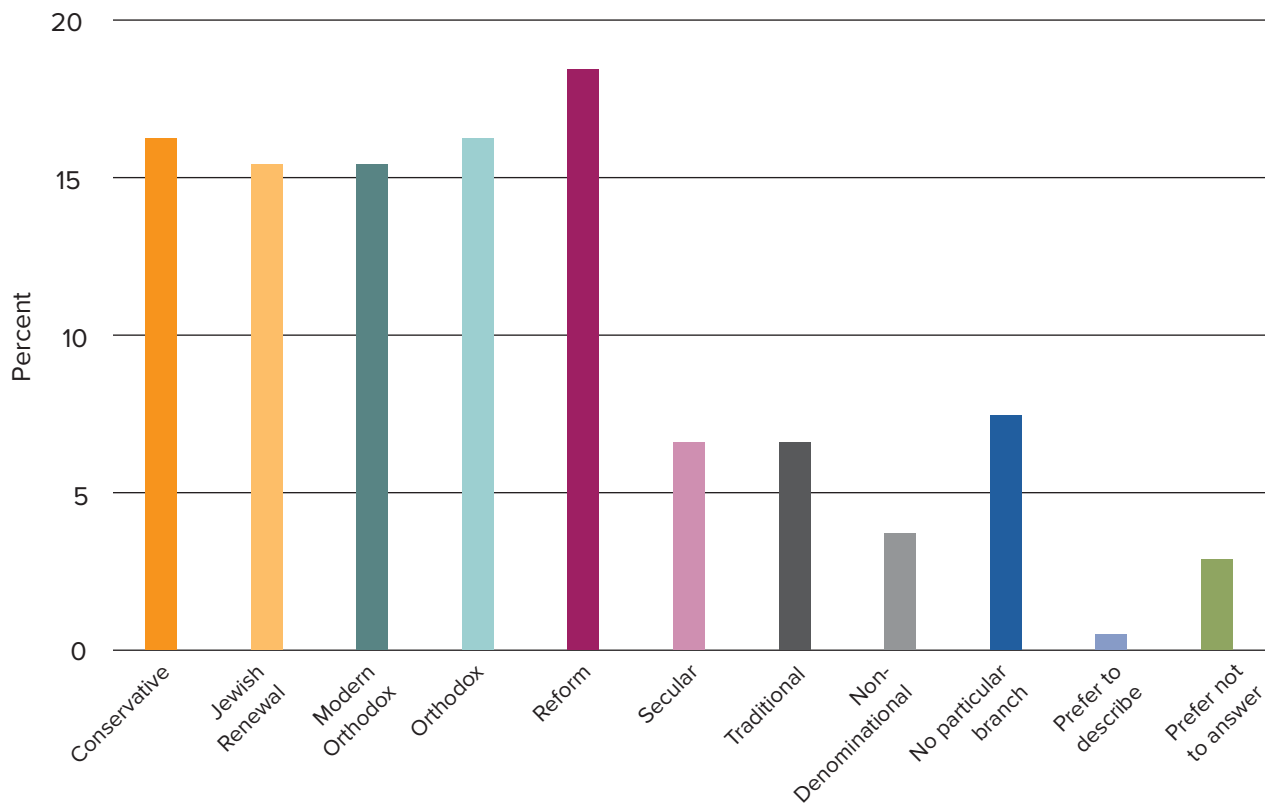
Jewish Community Affiliation

Many participants were connected with a variety of Jewish institutions: 50% of survey respondents reported that they were affiliated with a synagogue, 49% with a community center, 22% with a Jewish Day School, 22% with a Jewish Adult Learning Organization, and 13% with a Hillel.



Jewish Faith Affiliation

An overwhelming majority (84%) of Circles of Connection survey respondents reported that they felt connected or very connected to their religion or spirituality: 18% of Circles of Connection survey respondents identified as Reform, 16% as Conservative, 16% as Orthodox, 15% as Jewish Renewal, 15% as Modern Orthodox, 7% as secular, 7% as traditional, and 4% non-denominational. When asked how often they attend synagogue or other religious meetings, 33% said once a week, 29% said a few times a year, 19% said more than once a week, 11% said once a year or less, and 7% said never.



GPS also partnered with faculty from Smith College School for Social Work and Stony Brook University School for Social Welfare to collect data measuring the impact Circles of Connection had on participants. GPS and Smith College researchers designed and implemented pre- and post-participation surveys for participants and focus groups. The pre-participation survey gathered demographic information, and included validated scales addressing wellbeing, mental health, resilience, experience of discrimination, continuous traumatic stress, as well as participants' descriptions of their personal experiences related to the October 7 attack and its aftermath.

The post-participation survey, which was sent to participants after each Circles of Connection session, gathered detailed information about participants' experiences in their circle. Participants were also invited to attend a focus group after attending their circle to offer additional feedback.

Key findings for this report are based on feedback from the focus groups and survey questions. It is anticipated that additional results based on statistical analysis of the validated scales addressing wellbeing, mental health, resilience, experience of discrimination, and continuous traumatic stress will be published in 2025.

“It was powerful and validating to hear what others are going through and it was important to give space to my own feelings and needs.”

Key Findings

Circles of Connection sessions were helpful

Outcomes from the pilot were overwhelmingly positive, with participants noting that the expertise of Circles of Connection’s facilitators, coupled with Circles of Connection guidelines, created a community space that felt safe.

- “It was a good opportunity to practice disagreeing without arguing, which is something very difficult for me. The facilitators did a great job!”
- “I liked having the opportunity to share my experiences and listen to those of other people. It felt like a very safe space.”
- “I felt empowered to speak how I actually felt. It felt good to be in a group of likeminded people, yet also in a group of people who felt differently about everything.”
- “I am grateful I had a space to share my thoughts on some of the things I have been seeing around campus the past half year and that I was able to vent about issues that are hard to talk about.”
- “It was powerful and validating to hear what others are going through and it was important to give space to my own feelings and needs.”

The Circles of Connection model facilitated empowering experiences for participants

The model provided a consistent structure, and facilitators showed up authentically as themselves and supported participants to do the same, even when talking about difficult and sometimes divisive subjects.

- “I liked the ground rules. It helped to set the tone. I liked that everyone followed the rules. And I liked that the facilitators shared their feelings so it wasn’t an ‘us’ (the participants) and ‘them’ (the facilitators).”
- “The facilitators were fabulous! It was nice to be in a space where everyone had space to speak and be heard, without being talked over or having the conversation get diverted.”
- “I loved the ground rules/expectations for the group, and if I do any group work in my job, I will remember to incorporate similar ideas.”
- “I thought the leadership was terrific. They were very compassionate and non-judgmental so that the experience felt very warm and comfortable”

“Jews are feeling alone, it’s important to make them feel less alone.”

— Circles of Connection Participant

Jewish community members feel a need for community and connection

Over 88% of participants stressed how important a sense of community was to them. Many of them found that in Circles of Connection sessions.

- “I was reminded that I need to prioritize community in my life and Jewish community specifically is something that I am lacking.”
- “I was surprised by how freeing it felt to listen to others’ experiences as well as to share my own. I was not expecting that.”
- “I felt connected to the broader Jewish community. I resonated with expressions of feeling heartbroken.”
- “It was helpful to be in a communal space with the intention of sharing how difficult and challenging the last months have been. In most of my relationships and at work, I have to pretend that everything is OK and my mind is not otherwise occupied.”

“I need to find and prioritize building a Jewish community and circle in my life.”

— Circles of Connection Participant

“I think the important thing for me will be to remember that I am not alone and that a group of people that were totally unknown to me could come together and have a shared positive experience despite the tragic events we were discussing. That will stay with me for a long time to come.”

— Circles of Connection Participant

Circles of Connection sessions provided actionable ideas for life improvements

Participants reported a variety of new strategies and changes they intend to make in their lives based on their Circles of Connection experiences. These include seeking out mental health care, prioritizing self-care, engaging in the work of challenging antisemitism, seeking out time with friends and family to reduce isolation, and finding more opportunities for group-based experiences.

- “I’ve already reached out to my therapy practice owner about starting a Jewish specific support group as the mental health field in particular has been an unsafe space for many in our community.”
- “I need to find time to do relaxation, meditation, or even breathing exercises.”
- “Giving myself more time when needed to think about antisemitic issues instead of just pushing them away for later.”
- “I will keep looking for this kind of support, either in a formal group or even one-on-one with a friend.”

“I see how important and transformative support can be.”

— Circles of Connection Participant

Circles of Connection sessions facilitated understanding of commonality across differences

Many participants valued having a communal space where they could safely share their thoughts, despite not having the same experiences or even sharing the same opinions about local or world events as other participants.

- “We are really more alike than different, even if our positions on a topic differ.”
- “We’re all more similar than not, and burdens carried by many are lighter than those carried alone.”
- “It feels good to share experiences [even though] I have a complicated and unique experience in relation to Judaism.”



Focus Group Feedback

Overview

The focus groups were run in partnership with researchers from Smith College School for Social Work to learn more from participants about their experience of the program, to inform the Circles of Connection curriculum, facilitator training curriculum, and research methods, and to refine the ongoing development of the Circles of Connection program. Three focus groups were held in the weeks immediately following the circles.

Participants were asked to share how October 7th, the Israel-Hamas war, and global reaction to these events affected them and their communities. Many responded with similar answers such as “challenging,” “stressful,” and “lonely,” while also sharing personal details.

During the focus groups, participants were asked about what strategies they have used to meet the challenges and pain since 10/7, their experience in the circle they attended, which aspects of it they liked, and what changes could be considered to strengthen the program for their own communities.

Recurring Themes in Participant Responses

Relief

Participants described the palpable relief they felt in being able to be in community, even with people they didn't know, and talk about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

"I felt excited about the possibility of this being something that could exist in my life, kind of recognizing the lack of community that I have in my personal world and then also thinking professionally, like how badly I want this for my students. And for my community."

"I started having a bit of an anxiety attack during the session, because I'm the one person whose kid is completely on the other side. And whose worst experience with antisemitism came from other Jewish

students saying, 'How dare you call yourself a Jew.' Eventually, I was like, 'Alright, you're here, you have to share.' And it was amazing. It felt so validating to be able to say what my kid's been going through, what we've been going through as a family, being completely the one person who's coming from a different place. That was amazing. I came out of that feeling like I'm not a bad parent."

"I left and I felt rejuvenated in a way that I hadn't felt in eight months."

— Circles of Connection Participant

Awareness

During and after their experience, participants had immediate realizations and reflections that expanded their perspectives, supported their connection with each other, and gave them the ability to reflect on how to take better care of themselves.

"I didn't really know what I was going to say. Didn't really think too much about it ahead of time. But how am I going to talk for three minutes, and lo and behold, the three minutes just flew right by, and words just kept coming out of my mouth, and I didn't really know where the feelings were coming from."

"It hit me a lot harder than maybe I initially thought, and I think it took listening to other people and their experiences, feeling comfortable, and verbalizing my own experiences to really see that. So there was quite a bit of self-reflection. You know I really enjoyed it, and I didn't really know what to expect."

"I found myself the last couple weeks turning over various things that various participants have said, and that actually just makes me feel more fortunate. Whoever happened to land in my group and the remarks that were made have continued to help me feel connected and supported, even though, you know, we're kind of all over the place."

"I didn't realize how much I really had been impacted by the events of October 7th."

— Circles of Connection Participant

Honesty

Participants expressed the uniqueness and importance of having an opportunity to be together in a space where they felt that they could express feelings and share experiences they had not been able to talk about elsewhere. They expressed appreciation that the facilitators took an active role in ensuring that all participants adhered to the same guidelines, creating a space where participants felt they could speak freely.

“I think the facilitators being Jewish and describing honestly where they were helped. And the ground rules helped, as well. But I think mostly it was the disclosure by the people who are leading the group.”

“Something just occurred to me, the feeling of safety. And it wasn’t just that there were guidelines about what safety means and how we’re going to hold it in the session. But there were people there, who were going to enforce the safety. And I don’t mean in a mean way.”

“When I participated in the group last week, all of a sudden, I felt it right here in my chest, this tension. And I realized, I sort of was aware that I had a lot that I was holding in. But it wasn’t until I was in the group that I realized just how much I was holding in and just how much it was helpful to have a space to talk about it. So thank you for that.”

“I left the group feeling very grateful, and that sense of gratitude has been sustaining.”

— Circles of Connection Participant



CIRCLES OF CONNECTION NEXT STEPS

Expanding the Pilot

Based on the success of the pilot program, GPS will launch a GPS Circles of Connection Facilitator Training for 100 Jewish leaders across Greater Boston, with the goal of expanding Circles of Connection throughout Greater Boston by early 2025.

GPS Facilitator Training takes place over two months and provides mental health professionals and lay leaders with more than 20 hours of training on how to lead circles in their own communities. The training includes the cultural adaptations made for the Circles of Connection curriculum.

In partnership with JF&CS and JCC, invitations have been extended to leaders from Jewish early childhood programs and day schools, synagogues, Hillels, and other Jewish programs.

Incorporating Lessons from the Pilot

Feedback from Circles of Connection participants included a desire for the circles to be recurring with options for attending circles in person rather than via Zoom. The ideal number of participants per circle was identified to be 10-15 people, with no more than two facilitators per group and facilitators being from the same cohort and identity (e.g. Orthodox Jews, LGBTQIA+ Jews) as participants. The outline and structure of the circles has been adapted to ensure that there is sufficient time to introduce the guidelines as well as enough time for each participant to share and connect with each other.



Proven Model

The Jewish community members who participated in the Circles of Connection pilot program found it to be an effective tool for addressing suffering that is common for so many Jews since October 7th. Still others, who did not participate in the pilot but who are familiar with Circles of Connection, are eager to be involved. These sentiments were captured in interviews GPS conducted with more than 20 Greater Boston-based rabbis, leaders of Jewish organizations, synagogue directors, and Jewish clinicians, educators, mediators, and community organizers. The interviews were conducted before, during, and after the Circles of Connection pilot program launched.



Rabbi Jackson Mercer, Base Rabbi Boston, Moishe House, said he was eager to bring Circles of Connection to his community.

“We believe in cohort-based learning, because... there’s a lot of data that shows that that’s the most impactful. The idea of building peer groups feels totally intertwined with what we think our kind of mechanism for doing things is. ... Whatever [Circles of Connection] wants to do, we’re super down for, we would love to. We think that it’s really important. We haven’t done it yet because we’ve been really self-conscious about not wanting to open a can of worms that we don’t feel qualified to be addressing.”



Ali Shwartz, Mental Health Specialist at Gateways: Access to Jewish Education said that Circles of Connection could be an enormous resource to Jewish educators.

“Where I’ve seen the most distress is really with the educators and the adults. If I’m thinking about a target population that really could benefit from this kind of support, I think about our educators in day schools. So many of them are Israeli, or have ties to Israel, and they have no time to go out and go seek their own therapy. You’re in a school, you’re working pretty much all day. I would almost wonder if this kind of model could be brought into the schools and offered during the school day for educators, to really support them.”



Miriam Berkowitz Blue, Executive Director of Hillel Council, said that her organization was eager to get involved in the next iteration of Circles of Connection.

“I have staff that would really love to help and be a part of that. And I love this idea of coming together and not feeling alone. And also making connections across campuses, so that [students] know that they have each other when things are really hard.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GPS gratefully acknowledges the creative thought partnership offered by Jewish Family & Children's Service of Greater Boston, JCC Greater Boston, The Beker Foundation, and Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP)'s Center for Combating Antisemitism in the design and implementation of the Circles of Connection pilot program. GPS is also grateful to researchers from Smith College School of Social Work and Stony Brook University School for Social Welfare in the design of the research study. Funding from The Beker Foundation, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP)'s Center for Combating Antisemitism, The Ruderman Family Foundation, and other Boston-based foundations made this project possible.



ABOUT GPS

GPS Group Peer Support (GPS) is a mental wellness intervention that mitigates the long-term effects of stress, strain, and trauma. Incorporating elements of mindfulness-based stress reduction, cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing, peer-to-peer support, psychosocial education, and other evidence-based modalities, GPS is designed for the rapid implementation of essential mental health support during times of stress, crisis, and change. The GPS model has been successfully implemented among diverse populations including parents dealing with postpartum depression, residents of rural areas living with chronic conditions, people in recovery, refugees, survivors of war, and people facing oppression based on their racial, sexual, gender, religious, or other identities. It can be delivered by mental health clinicians or trained, non-clinical workers with relevant lived experience.

CONTACT US

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ADDENDUM

Circles of Connection Introductory Materials:

Circles of Connection Organizational Partner Information Deck

https://www.canva.com/design/DAGlsyZtNG0/WlwXLfoixRsTsjUJ1_Fe8w/view?utm_content=DAGlsyZtNG0&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=editor#1

Circles of Connection Facilitator Information Deck

https://www.canva.com/design/DAGJAoUXBRM/0mHNpEMcDBhRL9D-9jH31pw/view?utm_content=DAGJAoUXBRM&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=editor

Circles of Connection Information Session for Organizational Partners

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/4qJWt_EuzE1WY6abm7PPY1nqC-GEEfenLv5rrmET4y8V7-mih06uAIW4btOFDNsl.aozodXgq1YTCL17S

Circles of Connection Information Session for Facilitators

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