

HOW MENTAL HEALTH CIRCLES CHANGE RELUCTANCE TO OPENNESS THROUGH SOUTH CENTRAL HEALS

By Lauren Walters, Public Health Representative

In September, South Central Heals launched its first Mental Health Circle, which made an immediate impact. For all the participants (10 people who live in the South Central Heals census tracts), this was their first mental health session. Some were nervous and hesitated to speak about sharing personal experiences with people they didn't know. Persistent stigma surrounding mental health in the South Los Angeles area makes it so important to introduce these conversations in a familiar and trustworthy way.



The facilitators are trained Community Health Promoters who created a culturally responsive and welcoming environment to ensure participants felt safe, heard, and supported during the Mental Health Circle. Participants discussed stress management and neighborhood safety and were encouraged to share their experiences.

By the end of the hour, reluctance transformed into openness. A resident reflected after the session, “Uno de los aspectos más destacables fue la evidente resistencia inicial... y el cambio significativo en su actitud después de experimentar por sí mismos el Círculo de Bienestar,” (“One of the most remarkable aspects was the evident initial resistance... and the significant change in their attitude after experiencing the Wellness Circle for themselves.”)

South Central Heals’ Mental Health Circle model, developed by Henry Saray (trained mental health professional) in collaboration with USC, symbolizes wholeness, harmony, and flow. Through simple, therapeutic practices, Community Health Promoters helped participants explore emotional regulation, anxiety reduction, and the power of connection. The session emphasized that meaningful wellness work does not require a clinical setting; rather, it thrives in community.

All our attendees are excited that South Central Heals will have regular Mental Health Circles. Several participants who began the session feeling unsure later even volunteered to host future Mental Health Circles in their own homes. One contributor said, “Queremos que más vecinos vivan esta experiencia,” (“We want more neighbors to experience this.”) This enthusiasm shows the potential for Mental Health Circles to grow organically across South Los Angeles, helping normalize conversations about wellness, stress, reduce stigma, and improve mental health in our community.



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- translated from Spanish

