

MODULE 4-HOSTING & HOLDING SPACE

WHAT THIS HANDOUT IS ABOUT

This briefing is about **“holding space,”** which is perhaps the most essential role for a labyrinth host.

Additionally, we discuss points to consider when **hosting a labyrinth event**, including:

- The role of a host
- The meaning of and importance of holding a “sacred” or special space
- Opening the labyrinth
- Offering guidance for walkers
- Managing a walk – inviting people to enter the labyrinth, managing time
- Giving attention to walkers, including interventions & handling emotions and the unexpected
- Closing a walk
- Aftercare – for others & yourself.

These notes mainly assume a labyrinth walk that has been pre-planned to take place at a particular time, although many of the principles apply equally for spontaneous, informal, and more open-ended walks that you may be called upon or wish to host.

After working through this module, you should be well placed to answer the question – *what does a host need to know, do, be?*

To work through the module:

- **Read and reflect upon** THESE NOTES.
- **Watch the video:** <https://youtu.be/KuO6r5RCKSw> [Click on the Settings button in the YouTube video window to select subtitles for your language]
- **Work through** the REFLECTIVE EXERCISE.

Remember you can **CONTACT US** if you have any questions, or reflections that you’d like to share.

1. ROLE OF A HOST

A host’s role is fundamentally about welcoming and supporting walkers, and facilitating, or “making happen,” a safe, positive, and sacred walk experience. Among other things, this usually includes:

- Preparing the space to be ready to welcome walkers. In the English language, the idea of “hosting” closely relates to being “hospitable,” or a person who provides a safe and “homely” place for people to come. In ancient times in many cultures, a “host” was a guardian that made ready and kept burning a communal hearth or fire, as a place of rest for travelers. In the Greek myths, for example, the Goddess Hestia is usually associated with this role
- Welcoming walkers, offering aids to support them (for example handouts, materials for journaling their reflections following their walk)
- Introducing the labyrinth to newcomers, including letting them know how the walk will be opened/closed, and how they may wish to approach their walk

- Attending to latecomers, individuals who want to share experiences following their walk, and noticing what may be happening within the labyrinth. This normally means only intervening in exceptional circumstances.

2. "HOLDING SPACE"

In these notes and in the video, we refer to the idea of the labyrinth as a "sacred space". This may not be a concept that rings true with you, however our meaning is simply that coming into the labyrinth is "different" to being in the "normal" place of everyday life.

Many believe that a labyrinth is not unlike a sanctuary, or a special place for reflection and inspiration. Perhaps its center might be thought of as being like a hearth or welcoming, a "homely" place of safety and warmth.

Some believe that the labyrinth is an **archetype**—something that speaks to our inner selves, but which can't be easily put into words or explained. Certainly, a labyrinth's path that twists and turns in a special way can bring to the surface inspiring thoughts and feelings.

Some also often describe the labyrinth as being a **liminal** space, or a place where the normal rules of time and space are suspended. For this reason, labyrinths sometimes play a part in rites of passage and other ceremonies or rituals that are about coming into the unknown and being ready to be changed.

If you can accept any or all of these ideas, or at least that the labyrinth has an energy/affect of its own that we don't fully understand, but might respect, then as a host, you may wish (silently) that this "special touch" is extended to anyone that comes to walk it. You may at least wish for them helpful experiences, that they will benefit from and be positively changed or inspired as a result of their walk.

In holding the labyrinth's space, and holding (wishing well for) those who walk it, you honor and respect both the labyrinth, and the people that you are hosting. Simply being mindful of this focus and, if you feel able to, having positive intention in your heart toward them, is sufficient for providing this holding.

Dedicating, or warming a labyrinth

As when dedicating a labyrinth for the first time, when laying out a temporary labyrinth, you may wish to offer a brief, private word of thanks and dedication for the labyrinth (or with others). This important action is sometimes described by some as "**warming the labyrinth.**" If prayer is something that has meaning for you, then this may take the form of a prayer.

For example:

"Thank you labyrinth for your gifts and presence. Touch and hold all who walk you today."

If the walk is intended to have a specific focus, you might also ask and invite that this intention is held.

In opening and closing a walk, you may similarly wish to give a word of thanks to the labyrinth for offering its gifts and teaching (either silently or publicly). A simple respectful bow toward the labyrinth may serve the same purpose, if this feels right for you.

3. OFFERING GUIDANCE & INTRODUCING A WALK

Individuals coming to a walk may or may not have come to a labyrinth before. Furthermore, as host, you may prefer that they observe specific guidelines to respect the particular labyrinth that you're working with. Hence, it's usually helpful to offer a brief introduction before opening the labyrinth.

The following points suggest one way for welcoming individuals, introducing and opening the labyrinth.

- Welcome individuals as they arrive. Offer a handout, if available. Show where they may sit or wait, suggesting that they might like to take time to “arrive” (be at peace, feel that they can set aside whatever busy activities they may have come from).



A short introduction to the labyrinth might be useful for newcomers

- When it is time to start the walk, offer an introduction, typically no more than 5 minutes long. This may include:
 - A welcome to the gathered group as a whole
 - A brief explanation of what the labyrinth is, and why many people are drawn to them (for example, to just be at peace)
 - Noting that there is “no right way” for walking the labyrinth – all that’s involved is simply to walk, breathe, and be open to what may come
 - Explaining where the toilets are, any necessary fire/safety announcements (if relevant)
 - Mentioning the availability of a handout (if available)
 - Mentioning the availability of a finger labyrinth as an alternative to walking the ground or floor labyrinth (if available)
 - Offering voluntary donations toward the cost of the venue/labyrinth (if relevant)
 - Explaining the accessibility of the labyrinth for wheelchairs and people with walking aids
 - Saying how you will indicate starting / ending the walk
 - Pointing out where to enter/leave the labyrinth
 - Mentioning the availability of optional aids for walking, if available. These may include an invitation to take a card from a pack with a word or message for reflection/to hold open during the walk, offering scarves or items to wave or hold
 - Suggesting possible ways to approach a walk. For example, holding open a question while starting the inward walk into the labyrinth, then being open to whatever thought, image, or feeling may come. Point out that people shouldn’t worry if they feel led to do something else at any point in their walk
 - Mentioning any guidelines to observe for walking, such as removing muddy shoes, respecting other walkers, turning off mobile phones
 - Suggesting passing by others on the path who may be walking at a slower pace, or when moving in opposite directions to and from the center – simply to notice others, and gently step around them
 - Offering an invitation to rest or walk at any pace while in the labyrinth, start walking when the time feels right
 - Offering an invitation to rest at the center–sitting, kneeling, standing, doing what feels right, while respecting the labyrinth and other walkers
 - Mentioning that the return from the labyrinth’s center follows the same path as the way in, or that there is an alternative path leading out (as relevant for the type of labyrinth that you are working with)
 - Offering an invitation to wait and continue reflections after the walk. Suggested opportunity for note taking (journaling)/drawing if individuals feel inspired
 - Requesting that anyone leaving before the labyrinth closes does so quietly
 - Offering an invitation to share/stay for conversation after the walk (if relevant).

- OPENING the labyrinth. As host, this may take the form of a silent acknowledgment/thanks and wish for the labyrinth to receive and inspire those who come to walk it. A brief reading, chime of a bell (if available), or simply as host, coming close by the entrance of the labyrinth to welcome walkers may indicate the availability of the labyrinth for walking.

4. MANAGING A WALK

The task of managing a walk, once the labyrinth has been opened, is usually quite a simple one. The following points may be helpful to keep in mind.

- As walkers begin their walk, you may wish to stand close by the entrance to the labyrinth to welcome them and guide them onto the path.
- As walkers are approaching to enter the labyrinth, a queue may form close to the entrance. To allow for spacing at least at the start of the walk, you may wish to gently indicate (smile/extend your hand) when to start walking. Use your judgment when to invite the next person in the queue to step onto the path, typically allowing at least a gap of 30 seconds between each person entering.
- If no queue forms, or when a queue dwindles, a host may often wait by the labyrinth's entrance to welcome individuals when they are ready to start their walk.
- Once all or most walkers have entered the labyrinth, find a place that FEELS right to be – somewhere that's quite close to the outer edge (or sometimes on) the labyrinth, but that shouldn't make people feel that their space is being crowded. Ideally, during their walk, a walker should be largely unaware of your presence, and feel that they are alone with the labyrinth, except for where they need to pass by other walkers, or when being with others at the center. Awareness of others can be meaningful, as the walk along the labyrinth's path may sometimes be seen as a metaphor for the "walk of life" in which we meet and find ourselves in different relationships with many people, sometimes many at a time, at others just one or a very few.
- As you are hosting, you may like to slowly walk around the edge of the labyrinth, stand quietly to one side, or watch from a distance.
- Continue to give discrete, but mindful attention to walkers (see below).

5. ATTENDING TO WALKERS

In "holding space", as a host, we also are "holding" the people who may be walking a labyrinth, while we are not directly responsible for them in the same way that, for example, a guardian might be toward a child.

In the main, our task is not to interfere with someone's walk, "crowd space", or make them possibly feel uncomfortable in any way. A host's "holding" is gentle, silent, from a distance, and generally unnoticed by those who are being held.

We don't know what someone may be experiencing while they are walking a labyrinth. Normally, most people have a very pleasant experience. However, many different emotions and thoughts can arise when we enter a labyrinth. Some people can find that what arises for them is challenging, possibly sometimes even disturbing.

By keeping aware of what might be happening in the labyrinth, a host may be able to notice when someone may be dealing with something that is difficult for them. This may then be a time to indicate your "walking with them", and perhaps increase the possibility that they may be aware that you are present to hold them, but rarely is a time for intervening, or directly questioning what they may be processing.

The following points may be useful to bear in mind, to help you attend to the interests of walkers.

- Once all or most walkers have entered the labyrinth, keep aware of who may be arriving. Latecomers who have missed an introduction might want to ask questions, or you may wish to approach them to

quietly give them a very brief explanation of what the labyrinth is, what any guidelines for walking are (such as taking shoes off, if this is what you prefer), and a suggested way to approach their walk (such as holding open a question). You might simply prefer to offer them a handout sheet, explaining these points.

- Keep the labyrinth safe for walkers:
 - If you are using a temporary labyrinth that may not be very strongly anchored to the ground, keep an eye for any need to keep this in shape, if the surface becomes uneven as people are walking.
 - If people are running, or acting in a way that might cause harm for themselves or others in the labyrinth, be ready to point this out (this will often involve breaking your silence, while being sensitive to those who may be in a meditation).
- During periods of silence when people are walking, you may simply wish to hold good intention for those who are walking. If the idea of prayer is meaningful for you, you may wish to pray that those walking will receive what they are meant to receive, be at peace, be held by the labyrinth, or similar.
- If someone appears to be troubled or disturbed during their walk, generally it is wise NOT TO INTERVENE. Individuals may need time to process whatever may be affecting them, and what may appear to be a troubling episode may be necessary and cathartic for them. You may wish to keep the following in mind:
 - When processing trauma or disturbing experiences, individuals often wish to do so privately
 - As a labyrinth host, your role is not to act as a counselor, coach, healer, or therapist (unless the walk specifically forms a part of such a discipline). You may or may not be qualified in such things, however these are generally *not* appropriate to a walk. Separate from the labyrinth walk, you may wish to offer aftercare once the walker ends their walk, only if you are qualified to do so, or otherwise simply offer a “listening ear” and possibly suggest sources of help **ONLY IF A PERSON WANTS TO** talk after their walk. **Be aware of your own limits** to what help or guidance you may be able to give
 - In the event of a prolonged or potentially dangerous incident (to the person suffering or to other walkers), use your judgment about when and how to intervene.
- If someone falls over, has a health attack, or has some other experience that obviously requires emergency attention, attend to them immediately—calling upon emergency help if needed. Use your judgment to decide whether to bring the whole walk to a close (for example, if the incident is distracting for others, or obstructing a significant area on the labyrinth’s path).
- Thank or acknowledge (smile/nod) walkers as they leave. Be ready to talk quietly with any who want to ask a question, or share an experience that they have had.

6. CLOSING A WALK

You will generally have informed walkers how you intend to indicate when the walk is coming to a close during your introduction. The following is a possible approach:

- When the time available for the walk is drawing to a close, you may wish to make yourself more obviously visible to anyone who remains in the labyrinth (perhaps walking at a faster pace if you are circling around the labyrinth, or moving closer toward the center in a gentle spiral, but without crowding the space of others).
- If you have bells or chimes available, starting to ring these at increasingly relevant intervals may alert individuals that the time is drawing to a close. Avoid making sudden and especially loud sounds initially if you can, as this can be disturbing for individuals who are still in a meditative place and who need time to return to normal awareness.
- You might choose to offer a brief reading by way of a close, perhaps increasing the volume of your voice as you do so.
- If walkers remain unresponsive, you may need to speak to alert them to the time.

- Allow time for individuals to leave the labyrinth and return to their seats (if relevant) if you can before closing. If there is time, you may wish to allow some minutes for quiet reflection/journaling even after all walkers have left the labyrinth before closing the walk. It may be that some wish to walk again, assuming time is available.
- Mark, even if silently, the CLOSING of the walk. When closing, you may wish to ring a bell, offer a brief reading or reflection, or just silently offer your own thanks for what the labyrinth has gifted. An example of one form of words is a form of the *lovingkindness prayer*:

*May all who have walked here today know their wholeness,
May all be in their hearts,
May all be free from suffering,
May all be healed,
May all be at peace,
May all be happy.*

- Some hosts like to offer a respectful bow toward the labyrinth or word of acknowledgment/thanks when closing, before opening up to explain what may happen next – usually, simply thanking people for coming, suggesting where to find out more about the labyrinth, or offering a time for sharing reflections or social interaction.

7. AFTERCARE

Hosting a labyrinth walk can be surprisingly tiring. Unseen energies can affect both walkers and host, especially if silent healing has been happening within the labyrinth. Labyrinths have their own power and energy, which can be tiring to hold for a long time, as can the task of “holding” itself. Taking time to come away from the labyrinth slowly is therefore important. Aim to avoid undertaking too much intense work immediately after hosting a walk if you can. Pack away slowly, take time before driving or rushing out onto a busy street (if relevant).

Walkers may wish to talk with someone following their walk, which often may be you as host. Be ready to listen to them and give space for them to share what they wish. Thank them for their sharing.

For individuals who may have had a difficult experience during their walk, be ready to take extra time to allow them to continue to process or talk about their experience. Be wary about stepping into the role of counselor, therapist, or coach (see note above about attending to walkers) and be aware of the limits of what you may be qualified to help with, although you may be able to make suggestions about possible sources of help.

GOING FURTHER

HANDOUTS that may help:

- **Hosting a walk check-list** http://www.labyrinthlaunchpad.org/Hosting_Walks_Checkv01.pdf
- **Introducing a walk check-list** http://www.labyrinthlaunchpad.org/Intro_Walk_Check_v01.pdf

ARTICLES and other RESOURCES:

What does it mean to “hold space”? http://www.labyrinthlaunchpad.org/Hold_Spacev01.pdf