

Tips for Facilitating the Toolkit with Small Groups



Note: Facilitation could ideally take place in a Restorative Practice circle format for those familiar with the RP process and its components (center piece, talking piece and shared agreements). The circle process is a great way to facilitate face to face dialogue and create a sense of equality among participants.

Facilitation Tips:

- **Choose your space:** If you have the luxury of choosing your space, look for someplace that's comfortable, possibly with movable furniture. You could form a group circle which would allow everyone to see and hear each other easily. It may also mean a space away from your typical meeting space. Choose a location/space that fosters connection.
- **Be prepared:** Make sure everyone gets any necessary information, readings, or other material beforehand. Because many of the resources contain information accessed online, provide material with weblinks and videos to people via email or other digital communication programs.
- **Create a safe environment:** Group members need to be able to trust each other and that the space is safe from judgement and ridicule.
 - **Help the group establish guidelines or shared agreements:** The shared agreements of the group are guidelines that help create privacy and safety for the entire group. As the facilitator, be sure to model this safety and confidentiality yourself!
 - **Respect all participants:** Each participant has something interesting to offer the group. No matter how much you may disagree with participants, allow them to voice their opinion as long as they are within your group guidelines.
 - **Avoid giving advice:** When you hear other group members start to do this, gently remind them that "this is a safe group, and we're here to listen, not to give advice."
 - **Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words:** Lean forward when people are talking, for example, keep your body position open and approachable, smile when appropriate, and attend carefully to everyone, not just to those who are most articulate.
 - **Give positive feedback for joining the discussion:** Smile, reflect back group members' points to ensure understanding, and thank people for their participation.
 - **Be aware of people's reactions and feelings, and try to respond appropriately:** Observe not only individuals, but the whole group. How are people feeling? Being aware of the group's emotions will assist in diverting unnecessary emotional misunderstandings.
- **Be aware of time:** Stick to the agreed upon time frame for discussions and the allotted meeting as a whole.

Handling challenging behaviors and the flow of discussion:



Tips for Facilitating the Toolkit with Small Groups (continued)



The hard part of facilitation is handling discussions that involve multiple people and their personalities. This is never easy. Here are some of the common challenges that you may encounter, and some tips on handling them with compassion:

- **External Processor.** This person answers most if not all questions and typically responds first in the group. Remind everyone in the group of the guidelines and that this is an equal participation group. Using a talking piece can help structure this person's share into one response so others have the chance to contribute. If the problem continues, you can limit responses to a certain time frame (e.g. one minute) so others have time to respond. If necessary, talk to the person outside of the group about your concern.
- **Internal Processor.** This is the quiet person in the group who does not share. If you think participants who process more internally just need a little prompting, watch for signs that they might want to participate and ask them to share at that time. Be sure to affirm them after responding and reflect back their thoughts to encourage future responses. The use of a talking piece as a facilitation tool can also encourage internal processors to share more of their thoughts out loud.
- **Tangents, Helpful or Not?** This person can get the group off track by starting personal or random tangents. Feel free to go off on this tangent once in a while if you think it is appropriate, but also firmly bring the group back on track when needed. If the problem becomes excessive, again, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and let them know about the challenge you have in trying to get through all the material in the allotted time frame if the group goes too far off topic on numerous occasions.
- **Skepticism.** This person presents skepticism that at times feels like negativity. Take this opportunity to see if the group could use this skepticism to do a needed reality check, perhaps this individual's points could help the group be more realistic. It is also possible this person's skepticism could be a barrier to moving forward. In this case, invite the participant to entertain a perspective shift or help the group think of solutions to their skepticism.
- **Potentially Disruptive Behavior.** This individual gives advice, cuts people off, rolls his eyes or does other things that may upset members within the group. Remind everyone of the group guidelines and definitely have the one-on-one conversation outside of group to let the person know how important a safe group is, and what they can do to help make that happen.
- **Pre-existing Friendships.** At times relationships participants have outside the small group space can impact the broader group dynamics. When facilitating groups that have pockets of close friends, offer opportunities for varying opinions as a way to avoid groupthink. Assign partners for pairshare activities in ways that encourages group members to dialogue with participants they don't know as well.

Tips for Facilitating the Toolkit with Small Groups (continued)



Co-Facilitators

If you struggle with facilitation, having a co-facilitator might put you at ease.

Some people are more comfortable in co-facilitating. Co-facilitators can take turns and support each other, relieving some of the intensity that comes with facilitating by oneself. Co-facilitating can provide another pair of eyes and ears when analyzing what is happening with individuals and the whole group. You can bounce ideas off each other if any tweaks need to be made, such as suggesting a break or restructuring the group setup to improve the atmosphere. Additionally, co-facilitating is useful if one facilitator needs to step out of role to take part in the discussion, have a break or when back-up is needed in cases of tension, conflict, or confusion. Someone not actively facilitating can pay more attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting.

This linked article has a section on co-facilitating meetings.

