



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN PEER SUPPORT
GROUP FACILITATION TOOLKIT
Version 2

How to Use this Resource

To Cite this Document

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About this Resource

This resource has been created by people with lived/living experience working in the mental health and addiction field. We recognize that the realm of mental health and addiction support intersects with all parts of identity and experience. We encourage you to seek out learning and growth opportunities that can inform your language and practice regarding these intersections in the context of providing support to others.

If you have any questions about this resource, please contact
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Group Facilitation Toolkit

This resource will equip learners with essential skills and knowledge needed to facilitate supportive, wellness-oriented group discussions and engage group participants in co-creating inclusive spaces.

Through exploration of the content, you will learn about the role of a facilitator and proactive, structural approaches that lend to a group's success. You will also be able to draw from this knowledge as you seek to create a welcoming group environment in both virtual and in-person settings.

Section 1: You as a Facilitator

Section 2: Setting up for Success

Section 3: Creating a Welcoming Group Environment

You as a Facilitator



An important part of group facilitation is being mindful of how we show up in support of others. In the context of a group space, the role of a facilitator includes guiding and supporting discussions, interactions, and decision-making that reflects the purpose of the group itself.

In this section we will consider how a facilitator's approach, goals, and awareness of power dynamics can impact group spaces.

The Humble Facilitator

In taking a humble approach, facilitators:

Strive to be relational.

Everyone who enters a group brings with them unique knowledge and experiences. It is important to welcome this diversity and acknowledge the value that it adds to the space.

This approach is grounded in treating others with dignity and respect, no matter their previous experiences, and contributing to spaces where people can share authentically. Facilitators do not judge experiences or place them in a hierarchy. Relating to others in this way allows for group members to find points of connection and appreciate unique aspects of similar experiences.

Understand that we do not have all the answers

As a facilitator, there may be times when you do not know the answer to a question asked during a group. It is okay to say "I don't know" with dignity. In situations like this, several options are available. A facilitator may choose to ask the group members if anyone has knowledge related to the question and invite them to share in the space. They may also invite the person who asked the question to look into the topic and share what they learn with the group during a future session. Finally, facilitators may elect to do further research and share this with the group at a later session.

Acknowledge our humanity

Facilitators can make mistakes. When this happens, this can be acknowledged and shared within the group space. Grounding this practice approach in humanity supports the balancing of power and models strengths-based ways of responding to error.

Remember, there is always room for learning and growth as a facilitator.

Facilitation Goals

There are also several goals that guide a facilitator to build toward an environment where everyone feels included and valued. These include:

1. Engaging participants in establishing and maintaining group norms
2. Managing time effectively
3. Keeping the group grounded in its purpose and goals
4. Encouraging participation that fosters connection, discussion and mutual learning
5. Inspiring hope and demonstrating the possibility of recovery

Critical Self-Reflection

Facilitators must also be aware of the power that is inherent to the facilitation role and how this can impact group dynamics. Key considerations include:

- The perception of a facilitator's opinion as "correct"
- The perception of facilitator as an "expert"
- How a lack of awareness of personal bias can influence a group

Facilitators seek to minimize power imbalances and mitigate any impacts to the group dynamic whenever possible. This may look like using a democratic approach for decision making during a group, identifying when a facilitator is sharing personal experiences and opinions rather than objective information, sharing that everyone has expertise in their own lives and experiences, and aligning responses and actions with the Guiding Standards of Peer Support to avoid being guided by subjective bias.

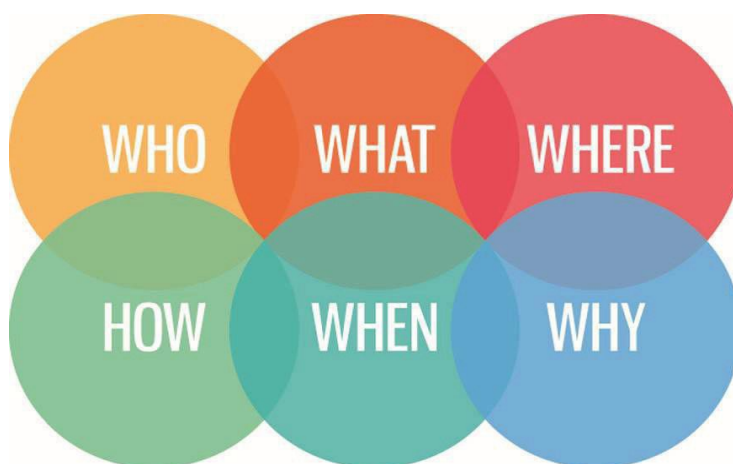
The first step in minimizing the impacts of personal bias on group spaces and participants is becoming aware of when biases are present. Having an awareness of bias enables each person to be mindful and intentional about how they engage in group settings.

Setting up for Success

Preparation is key when it comes to setting a group up to be successful. Part of this preparation occurs internally. This encourages an understanding of and responsiveness to one's wellness needs in support of a grounded, centered frame of mind when entering a group space. This is complemented by proactive, structural measures that help to keep group spaces organized and establish a clear purpose within the space.

Group Planning and Preparation

The first step in group planning and preparation is determining the purpose of the group and the structure that would best support exploration of the topic you wish to explore. There are several key questions to ask during this stage



Consider the following:

- What topics of interest have been identified by the group participants?
- Would a fixed or ongoing group timeline be best for this exploration?
- Would a registration-based or drop-in group structure be helpful?
- How much time is needed for research and preparation?
- What is the format of the group?
- What materials are needed for the group?
- How will the facilitator communicate the materials needed for group with participants?

KEY TERM	DEFINITION
FIXED TIMELINE GROUPS	A group that meets for a predetermined number of sessions
ONGOING GROUPS	A group that is consistently offered without an end date

Staffing Considerations

Vital to the success of any group is an effective facilitation team. Every program will have a unique staff complement and resources available to support service provision. Whenever possible, it is helpful to have at least two trained supporters in a group space. Communication with group participants about who the supporters are in the group and how they can be supportive during the group further lends to more cohesive dynamics and processes in the group space.

There may be times when the facilitation team is unable to respond to a participant's request for support while a group is taking place. It is helpful to be aware of and provide resources, such as warm lines or crisis services, at the beginning of a group to which participants can connect if needed.

Here are some possible roles to consider during the group planning stage and their primary responsibilities:

Facilitator

A facilitator's attention must be dedicated to the group and conversation at hand. They will be the primary communicator of what to expect during the group time, values or norms that will guide the time spent together, and any other information that will establish clarity.

Throughout the group the facilitator maintains the flow of the group and discussion. This requires time management skills and an awareness of the group's purpose. As needed, they will reorient participants to the group values to ensure a welcoming, inclusive group space.

Host/Co-facilitator

The core responsibility of this role is to support the facilitator to maintain focus on the group and provide background support. The specific tasks connected to this role may vary based on whether a group is facilitated virtually or in-person. In virtual spaces, this role focuses on providing support to participants to enable participation in the group. This can be done using the chat function on a virtual platform and may involve supporting participants to navigate challenges with technology. In any group space, this may also look like orienting participants to the space so that they can participate effectively.

There may be times when privacy and safety must be ensured. If someone appears in the background of a group participant in a virtual setting, the Host can connect with the participant by sending a private message to have them relocate to a private space, upholding confidentiality of others in attendance.

The person in this role can also complete administrative tasks, such as attendance or sign-in procedures, and support the facilitation of the group by modeling ways of sharing during discussion or creating breakout rooms for small group activities.

In any group space, the person in this role may also co-facilitate group content if needed.

Intern/Volunteer

Some organizations offer opportunities for volunteering or internship connected to group programming. Those in either of these roles play a vital part in modelling ways of sharing experiences that inspire hope and uphold safety in the group.

They may speak about strategies and tools that support their wellness and share resources of which they are aware.

Back-up Staff

There may be times when those scheduled to be a part of a facilitation team require the support of a back-up staff member (e.g., filling in for planned time off from work or a need to use sick time). For this reason, it can be useful to assign another staff member to a “back-up” role, to be called in if needed.

Back-up staff should be given as much notice as possible so that they can prepare themselves to be a part of the space. It may be helpful to create a schedule that reflects a specific staff member as the back-up staff for clarity.

Once the facilitation team has been established, effective communication between its members will further encourage a group success. Setting aside time before and after a group for the team to connect can go a long way in accomplishing this goal. Meeting briefly before the group ensures times to establish role clarity, an understanding of the groups purpose, and the plan that will guide the group session. A post-group connection allows for a debrief to explore what went well during the group as well as anything that could be improved going forward.

Creating a Welcoming Group Environment

Central to the success of any group space is the ability to create a welcoming environment. In this final section, we will explore some of the ways we can realize this goal.

Below we will discuss strategies and practices that lend to a welcoming environment. Consider how these practices can apply to group spaces to which you are connected.



1. Encourage participants to take care of themselves during the group as needed. A facilitator may dedicate time at the beginning of each group to brainstorm with participants different ways that they can support themselves during the group so that these strategies are readily available
2. Ask participants if there are any accessibility needs or barriers to participation and mitigate those barriers wherever possible.
3. Share with participants what they can expect during your time together. This is consistent with a trauma-informed approach to service provision and contributes to clarity within the group.
4. Offering light refreshments during a group, when and if possible, can also contribute to a welcoming environment
5. Encourage participants to participate in ways that are comfortable for them and let them know about the options available to them. In a virtual space this might sound like letting participants know that they can indicate their wish to share by raising their virtual hand or using the chat feature to share their thoughts. In a physical group space, this might sound like asking participants to raise a hand if they wish to speak or letting them know that there is no pressure to verbally share during a group.
6. Never underestimate the power of a warm greeting. Saying hello to participants as they arrive and introducing yourself goes a long way to set a positive tone for the group and build connection.
7. Establish supportive structure by orienting participants to the group space. This would include the functions of a virtual platform or the layout of a physical space.
8. Supportive structure can also be encouraged by following a reliable group format, which may begin with reviewing group values followed by exploring the topic selected for that day and concluding the group with a summary or checkout activity.

Establishing a Supportive Group Structure

There is no "one way" to structure a group. Determining the structure that will best suit each environment requires taking note of the resources and staff complement available to support the group. Each staff member will have unique strengths, skillsets, and interests that can be reflected in group offerings.

It is also very important to invite those attending the group to express their needs and preferences. Incorporating participants' voices into the group structure will ultimately ensure that programming reflects that which is relevant and meaningful to the community.

Below is a proposed group structure that includes several possible supportive elements. As you review each element, consider how they work together in support of a welcoming group environment.

Proposed Group Structure

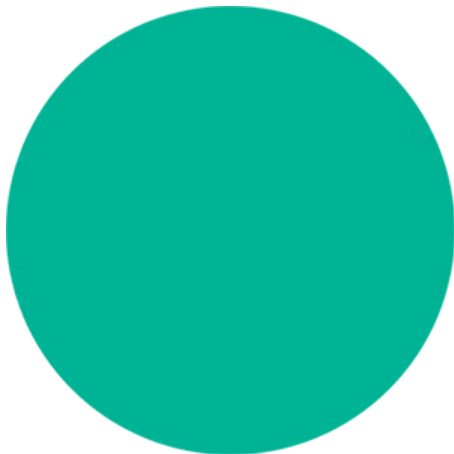
Reviewing Group Values

Group Values, sometimes called group guidelines or group norms, create a point of reference to which the group can return if needed. They are intended to outline respectful ways of engaging in the group space, enhance collaboration and mutual support, provide a framework for addressing conflict or differences of opinion, and keep the group focused on its purpose.

Facilitators can share that the group is grounded in these values to encourage a safe and inclusive environment where people can connect and share parts of their wellness journeys. This is most effective when participants are present for and included in the process of establishing the values that will guide the group. Inclusion in the conversation provides an opportunity for participants to better understand the context for group values, understand why they are important, and communicate their needs.

The following Group Values are those that guide groups offered by the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support. These values were informed by peers attending these spaces and are reviewed at the beginning of each group session to create a foundation for conversations that explore topics related to hope, wellness, and personal recovery.

VALUE	DESCRIPTION
INTEGRITY, AUTHENTICITY & TRUST	Respect each other's privacy. Staff will only disclose information if someone expresses that they are at risk of serious harm to themselves or others or if a child under the age of 16 is at risk of harm.
DIGNITY, RESPECT & SOCIAL INCLUSION	Group members will support an environment that is free from stigma, prejudice and discrimination.
EMPATHETIC & EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS	Group members will be open-minded to each other's journey and experiences. Time will be equitably so that there is space for all to share.
LIFELONG LEARNING & PERSONAL GROWTH	Differences of opinion are opportunities to hold space for each other without judgment.
HEALTH & WELLNESS	When speaking about painful or traumatic experiences, share about the impacts rather than the details of the experience in support of each other's wellness.
SELF-DETERMINATION	Everyone is invited to share during the group if they are comfortable. Everyone has the right to decide what is most supportive to them in their wellness journey. These choices are unique to everyone.



CONSIDER A SCENARIO

When a group participant shares about their challenges with substance use another peer says, "You should really be practicing abstinence. I could never have just one, that's impossible. It's abstinence or nothing."

How would you respond as the group facilitator using Group Values?

Housekeeping

This is an opportunity to share or revisit key reminders, provide any agency updates and share any information ahead of the group. This may include orientation to the physical space in an in-person group or a reminder about how to use a variety of functions in a virtual platform.

Supporting Oneself and the Space

In a conversation about wellness and related experiences, there is always a possibility that anyone present in the group could feel uncomfortable with the conversation. It is helpful to address this possibility from the beginning and set aside time for participants to think about how they can support themselves if discomfort arises. This might look like an open dialogue where everyone is invited to share a strategy that they plan to use during the group time (e.g., grounding techniques).

Check-in

A group check-in provides the space to bring everyone together and set a positive tone, similar to an icebreaker. While everyone shares, this also gives the facilitator an opportunity to gauge the energy of the room and listen for common themes in what is shared. When developing a check-in question, facilitators can provide structure and direction to encourage shares that are safer for group spaces.

Facilitating Content and Discussion

One of the ways that facilitators can engage participants in discussion is by asking questions. Open-ended questions are useful when trying to encourage a more in-depth share while close-ended questions are better suited to shorter, often one-word answers.

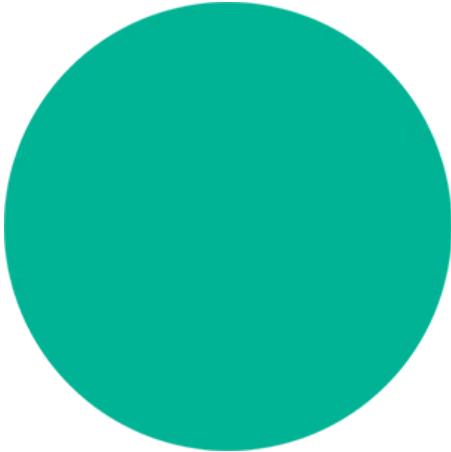
There may be times when silence occurs in a group space. Don't be afraid of this. Silence provides an opportunity for people to formulate their thoughts.

While the facilitation team may feel the need to fill the silence, so will others. Waiting may prompt someone else to share something they have been working up the courage to say.

There may also be times when conversations deviate from their original intention. Facilitators can re-focus the conversation on the original topic by paraphrasing a person's point, highlighting the information relevant to the topic. They may also choose to interject, reminding the group of the topic at hand, letting them know that any new topics can be discussed later in the group if time allows. It is important that this is done with kindness.

Finally, there may be times when a participant disagrees with a facilitator. This presents an opportunity to model how to hold space for a variety of experiences and perspectives during a group and engage in respectful communication while sharing from different viewpoints.

Additional facilitation skills that support the flow of any group space include consistency, communicating clearly, having knowledge about and sharing local resources, encouraging individuals to support themselves as needed during the group, knowing when to take a break or ground the group, and cultivating a sense of community.



CONSIDER A SCENARIO

The group determines they wish to talk about navigating anxiety at work. A peer starts sharing and deviates to a new topic.

How would you respond as the group facilitator?

Check-out

A group check-out provides the space to bring everyone together once again, honour the conversation that has occurred, and conclude the group. Similar to a check-in, when developing a check-out question, providing structure and direction to encourage shares that are safer for group spaces is recommended.

Welcoming Feedback

The best way to know whether group programming is reflective of what participants want to see is to ask them. Plan-Do-Study-Act quality improvement cycles enable organizations to create and actionize a plan to hear from those attending group spaces and integrate the feedback received when planning for the future.

Depending on the needs of participants and capacity of program staff, feedback may be received through:

- Anonymous or identified surveys
- Virtual, live polls
- Informal feedback mechanisms, such as emails, phone calls, and other direct communication with participants

About the Centre

Recognized provincially for its award-winning services, Support House Centre for Innovation in Peer Support (the Centre) has evolved into a "Benchmark of Excellence" in peer support and experience-based engagement and co-design. The Centre is dedicated to implementing innovative best practices for meaningful and equitable engagement and partnerships with individuals who have lived/living experience, as well as their family/caregivers, across Ontario.

Our History

Originally established as a Consumer Survivor Initiative in 1999 under the name TEACH (Teach, Empower, Advocate for Community Health), the need for support and training for agencies providing authentic peer support was identified. As a result, in 2015, the Centre received new base funding from the legacy Mississauga Halton LHIN to offer regional and provincial system support for Health Service Providers (HSPs). This support includes hospital psychiatric inpatient units, addiction residential treatment, supportive housing programs, central access, employment support programs, justice, community mental health and addiction providers, and self-help education and support groups. This scope has since expanded to encompass regional, provincial, national, and international collaborations.

Supporting People Engaging in Services

Our service offerings include wellness-based, peer-led self-help and social connection programs for community members. These programs are designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated by individuals with lived/living experience. We work together to foster community and connection by creating safe spaces where people navigating mental health and substance use/addiction challenges, can heal and grow.

Supporting Provincial Systems & Partners

The Centre's Provincial, Systems & Partner stream is continually evolving to support organizations that provide peer support services and to foster meaningful, equitable engagement, co-design, and partnership with individuals who have lived/living experience, as well as family/caregivers for roles on advisory tables, working groups, committees, and government boards. We create learning opportunities through co-design, education and training, consultations, capacity building, collaborations and partnerships, and the development of resources and toolkits, drawing on our expertise in engagement stewardship.

Additional learning resources are available in our Virtual Learning Centre and Resource Hub, where you can explore information about our provincial communities of practice, toolkits, models, and other resources. The Centre is committed to enhancing the capacity of individuals with lived/living experience, family/caregivers, peer support workers, supervisors, health service providers, and regional and provincial healthcare systems. We aspire to co-design and co-create an inclusive and equitable healthcare response, regardless of complexity.

About Support House

Support House is guided by our core values, which shape our agency's decisions and actions, unite our staff, define our brand, and inspire our culture. We put people first—our supports are person-directed. We connect and engage, starting conversations to build and maintain relationships. We focus on health and wellness practices to inspire our culture. All employees are required to adhere to our values-based oath of conduct.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

All programming offered by Support House Centre for Innovation in Peer Support related to the practice of peer support is delivered through our Learning Centre & Resource Hub.

The Learning Centre provides a range of opportunities, including self-directed e-learning, facilitated learning programs, consultation services, and provincial communities of practice.

The Resource Hub houses our educational toolkits, documents, and videos. Together, these resources reflect current best practices in the delivery and implementation of Peer Support across Ontario.

Products on our Resource Hub:

[Guiding Standards of Peer Support Handout](#)

[The Peer Support Examining Bias Toolkit](#)

[**CLICK HERE TO VISIT OUR LEARNING CENTRE & RESOURCE HUB**](#)