
Part B: Information for Facilitators and Group Leaders

The following section provides

- some background information on the role of a Facilitator in a Group, and
- information on the theory of how groups work.

This information is intended as a guide, which may be useful for people who are new to this role or want some more information.

Remember that not everyone will want to take on this role, or is suited to it, while others will already have experience in this role, or will be able to naturally take up the task.

It is best if participants are supported into the role, if they wish to take it on.

The information provided is based on “Support Group Training Kit” developed by the NSW Mental Health Association.

The Role of the Facilitator

Confidentiality – It is important to emphasize that what is spoken in the room, stays in the room.

Provide Safety - by fostering a supportive, trustworthy and friendly atmosphere. This is accomplished by ensuring the guidelines, and goals of the Group are met, and by maintaining time limits on discussions by voice, timer or bell.

Encourage Participation - Not every member immediately shares with the Group. The facilitator, gently encourages members to participate, but be aware of their limitations. Find out what members want from their meetings, and that all decision making is fair to all members.

Provide Opportunities for Everyone - It is essential to create an environment in which all members of the Group regardless of race, religion, sex or disability have equal opportunity to participate. This means taking the time and effort to discover what people's needs are and develop practices to ensure that those are met.

Provide Focus - by tactfully redirecting conversations that are not related to the current topic (some men may go off on a tangent which may be irrelevant to the topic.)

'Active Listeners' - Active listeners are sensitive to what is, and what is not said. Look around the Group for boredom, talking, hands up for interjection and detect open and subtle pain or grief in another, and respond to these. If you believe the Group has ignored an important point, go back to it.

Foster Personal Responsibility - Facilitators should not exclusively enforce the rules of the Group. Members should also have an obligation to the Group's welfare and be encouraged to extend their comfort zones.

Encourage Self-esteem - Let members know that their sharing is important to the Group and thank them, and that they are valued as individuals. Don't permit personal attacks on any member during Group meetings. Also include and encourage humour in the Group.

Handle Problems - Members may try to monopolise the discussion in the Group, become angry and in conflict, question others too aggressively, or violate Group guidelines in other ways. A good facilitator deals with these situations tactfully through a combination of appropriate comments and actions.

Share - Facilitators should NOT forget that they are also Group members. They should share feelings and experiences when appropriate.

Honest Feedback - Obtain feedback from each member on how they feel at the end of the meeting (be prepared to be upfront).

Farewell - Shake hands with each member and invite them back to the next meeting.

Welcoming new participants - Here are some ideas for making new members feel welcome and accepted:

- Have some longstanding members of the Group responsible for making new members welcome – maybe they could introduce the new man to other members before the meeting or during the coffee break.
- At the start of the meeting acknowledge the new man (men) and welcome them to the Group and explain the purpose and processes of the Group.
- Make sure each man introduces himself to the new visitor.
- Make sure each new participant gets a copy of the manual and any other printed information. You may prefer not to hand out member details such as contact lists initially.
- Recognise that it is his first meeting and that it might take a while for the man to feel accepted and trust to be built up to enable him to open up. Encourage all the men to create new friendships within the Group members. Organise an existing member to ring or make personal contact with the new man during the following week.

Some Useful Skills for a Group Facilitator

Regardless of the Group facilitator's background, it is important to have or develop the skills and attributes below:

- An interest in and an understanding of the purpose of an OM:NI Group and the other members of the Group, in order to create trust and loyalty.
- Good listening skills and making eye contact.
- An understanding and appreciation of other's thoughts and feelings.
- Ability to be non judgmental – as a Group facilitator you need to be open to other men's different experiences, values, beliefs and opinions.
- Ability to resolve conflict and deal with difficult situations.
- Awareness of your own capabilities and limitations – The Group will sometimes not meet the needs of all its members and will not find a solution to every issue discussed.

What a Facilitator Does Not Do

- Believe that the Group is 'their Group'. It is essential that Group members all feel that they have some 'ownership' of the Group.
- Dominate and monopolise the discussions.
- Dictate what the Group will discuss.
- Lecture or preach, or lead members to believe that you have all the answers. Encourage members to have realistic expectations of the Group.
- Attempt to run a therapy group.
- Breach confidentiality.

A Code of Ethics for Group Facilitation

The code of ethics below is to assist OM:NI Group facilitators maintain a consistent and ethical approach for all OM:NI Groups.

Group facilitators agree to:

1. Keep and protect the confidentiality of Group members by clearly defining:
 - What it means.
 - Why it is important.
 - The risk and difficulties involved in its enforcement.
2. Respect and encourage the voluntary participation of Group members so as to improve and foster each man's sense of self, well-being and connectedness.
3. Refrain from imposing personal agendas, values, attitudes and morals on other Group members.
4. Not secretly record Group sessions without the permission of the Group members.
5. Not use any therapy technique or strategy in the facilitation of an OM:NI Group.
6. Provide information to all Group members about activities in which they may participate.

Sharing the Role of Facilitator

Establishing and facilitating a Group can take a lot of time and energy. Sharing the responsibilities amongst people in the Group can mean less work for any one person and make the experience more rewarding. If people in your Group find the idea of facilitating the Group too daunting you could consider having more than one facilitator for each or some meetings.

Advantages of Co-facilitation Work

There are several advantages to sharing the facilitation of an OM:NI Group. These include:

- Tasks and responsibilities of setting up and facilitating the Group are shared.
- Facilitators can provide support for one another.
- If one Group facilitator cannot attend a meeting there is someone else to take their place.
- Having another facilitator, can give you extra moral support when starting up a new Group.
- Two or more facilitators will bring different skills, experiences and ideas to the Group.
- New ideas can be easier to conceive with two heads rather than one.
- Facilitators can debrief with each other after the meeting.
- It is another way of supporting another Group member to become a facilitator.
- Groups that share responsibility for facilitating the Group amongst all the members report that members feel more personally involved with the Group and have increased self-esteem.

How to Make Co-facilitation Work

While co-facilitation of the Group has many advantages, it also requires effort on the part of each facilitator, for it to be successful and a positive experience for the Group.

The following points will help make co-facilitation a rewarding and positive experience for all:

- Each facilitator needs to be clear from the start about their role in the Group and who will do what.
- Allow time together to plan the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting facilitators should discuss issues that arose during the meeting and allow time to debrief.
- Good communication – facilitators need to be able to discuss their differences, problems and tensions with each other.
- There needs to be agreement about the objectives and purpose of the Group.

Disadvantages of Co-facilitation

If there is conflict between the Group facilitators or the above points are not taken into consideration, co-facilitation can be a negative experience for both facilitators and Group members. If your Group has a number of participants who take turns to facilitate the meetings, it is important that everyone is clear about who is facilitating the meeting, and the roles of other people in the Group for that meeting.

Negative consequences include:

- Significant differences between facilitators will be observed by Group members and may make them feel uncomfortable in the Group.
- If one facilitator 'takes over' the other facilitator could feel undermined, leading to tensions between the facilitators.
- Facilitators will be less focused on the needs of the Group and more concerned with their differences.
- Group members will not return and the Group may collapse.

Looking After Yourself

Taking on the role of facilitator can be exiting and rewarding but can also take some time and you may find it hard work at times. It is important that you reflect on your role as facilitator, and consider how it may be impacting on your participation in the Group.

Below are some ideas on how you as a facilitator can help maintain your own enjoyment of the Group:

- Reflect on positive things that happen, not just the negative.
- Ask Group members for feedback – they will be less critical than you.
- Share responsibilities and tasks with other Group members; others may enjoy the opportunity.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed and there is no other designated facilitator, ask for help from other members in the Group.
- Feel able to take time out from the Group if you need to. The Group can still carry on and you will probably return to the Group refreshed and with more energy.
- Recognize your own limits – you may need some time out as a facilitator so you can enjoy the Group as a participant.

Understanding Groups

Understanding some of the basic concepts of Groups and how they work can assist a facilitator understand what is happening in the Group and aid the facilitation process.

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics can be defined as looking at the what, when, why and how a group operates. It is about observing the Group as a whole and the interaction between individual members and the members and the facilitator to gain an understanding of what is happening in the Group. For example, the Group sits in silence. The question most facilitators probably ask themselves is “What can I do to get the Group going?” However, if the Group dynamics are taken into consideration, the facilitator could observe the Group and ask themselves the following:

- Is it just a working silence where members are just thinking hard about a particular issue and how to respond to it?
- Is there a lack of trust or a high level of anxiety in the Group?
- Is it that there’s a lot of quiet people in the Group?
- Is it because the Group doesn’t understand or have interest in this particular topic?

When to Monitor Group Dynamics

- At regular intervals, for example, every 5 minutes.
- At the end of each session.
- When something unexpected happens.
- When something expected doesn’t happen.

Who to consider

- The individual participants.
- The Group as a whole.
- The Group facilitator.

What to consider

- Levels of trust.
- Patterns of communication.
- The environment.
- The content.
- External factors.
- The stage of development of the Group.

Group Theory

There are different theories about the stages that groups go through and like group dynamics, they can be useful for group members and the facilitator to understand what is happening in the group.

One popular theory development describes the stages a group goes through in terms of forming, storming, norming and performing (*Tuckman, 1964*).

- **Forming** - Groups begin by members getting to know each other, integrating and getting clear about why they are there.
- **Storming** - Group members might have different ideas things such as how the Group should work, its objectives and who should be included.. These differences will cause them to 'storm' with one another.
- **Norming** - As the issues get resolved and the 'storms' subside, Group members generally establish agreements (often unconsciously) on roles, leadership, guidelines, objectives and operating norms.
- **Performing** - The Group is now ready to perform and do the work they set out to do.

According to *Tuckman*, the stages are predictable and inevitable to some extent for every group. They can go quickly or seemingly take forever.

Understanding that the Group you facilitate is likely to go through these stages can help you understand what is happening in the Group.

Running Into Problems

Despite the best intentions and putting in place processes to help your OM:NI Group run smoothly and effectively, problems can still arise, such as:

- conflict amongst members of the Group;
- problems with the meeting venue, or finding a new venue;
- small attendances;
- people taking over the Group;
- lack of leadership.

If you are having problems or concerns about any aspect of your OM:NI Group, feel free to contact COTA. We will try to help you find a solution, or assist with the involvement of one of the OM:NI volunteers or peer educators.

There is a great wealth of experience within the OM:NI network of Groups and you may like to contact another Group to share your experiences and learn from each other. The OM:NI Quarterly Representatives Meetings, and OM:NI Gatherings provide networking opportunities to deal with some of these issues.

Closing or Starting a New Group

If your Group is very successful you may have too many participants and need to 'close' the Group to members, for at least a period of time. Or if interest in your Group is high, you may want to establish a new Group in your area.

COTA Victoria will work with you and/or local organisations to establish an OM:NI Group, along with men who are OM:NI volunteers and peer educators. They will help establish the new Group by:

- attending the launch of the new group, and talking about OM:NI and their experiences of being a participant in a Group,
- attending the first 4-6 meetings of the group to help facilitate the discussion and establish the processes for the group,
- helping men who may be interested in becoming facilitators themselves,
- being a contact for the Group if there are any problems or issues in the Group.

The focus of the initial sessions will be to encourage a positive approach to ageing, and to help the men discuss their own health and ageing issues and concerns. This will lay a good foundation for the continued success of the Group.

Why developing local partners is essential.

Teaming up with local organizations in the area where a new Group will be developed provides: access to local knowledge and networks; possible venues; local promotion and publicity; access to local men; ongoing support and referral opportunities. Partners might include RSLs, Local Councils, Community Centres and Neighbourhood houses, or other organizations like Vision Australia, Retirement Villages, Rotary Clubs, Men's Sheds.

In some circumstances it may be useful to develop a local OM:NI working group comprising 6 -8 which would plan a launch and find a venue for the new Group. In other situations working with only one partner to plan the development of an OM:NI Group can be the starting point.

Developing a launch for a new Group

Having an event for the launch of the discussion program and the establishment of the OM:NI Group has proved a useful step in the process. The launch provides a focus for media publicity, provides an opportunity to promote the discussion group program and the benefits of OM:NI widely, and is promoted to local older men to form the basis for the first meeting.

Please contact COTA to discuss how we can help your Group in these matters