

## Working with Groups

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### 1. Introduction

Groups can provide many things: support, acceptance, socialising, shared interests, networking, achievements, opportunities to develop friendships, understanding, hope for recovery and ability to move on, confidence, commitment, mutual nurturing, and caring.

Being part of a group where people have shared experiences including mental health issues, can provide the right level of understanding and support for people to be able to open up and share with total acceptance. It can help with confidence building, as well as developing trust, mutual support and on going relationships.

The information on these pages is useful for people who want to run groups for people with experience of mental distress. It focuses largely on groups who want to meet face to face. It is also useful for people who are supporting others to run these groups.

## 2. Before you start

### Group Theory

Before you start it can be helpful to know a bit about group theory. If something happens in your group, the chances are it has probably happened in someone else's. Understanding what can come up can help you plan ahead, design procedures and look for solutions.

There are many theories around how groups develop. Most are based around the idea that groups go through the following different stages:

1. **Start.** Everyone gets to know each other. People may be anxious or wary of others.
2. **Crunch.** Individuals may challenge each other. There may be competition for leadership, as well as different sub groups forming. Groups going through the crunch stage can often think their group is not working, when it is just part of a natural process. However, some people may find this very uncomfortable and leave. The group may be unable to move forward, and may start to dissolve.
3. **Belonging.** The group has settled, and started to relax. Understanding, acceptance, and commitment allows the group to open up to each other. New members may feel they have to be a certain way in order to be part of the group.
4. **Co-operation.** The group works well together. However, a difference may develop between why the group was set up, and what it needs.
5. **Crossroads.** The group comes to an end, or the group continues maybe for social and/or support reasons. The group could also continue in order to run a project or activities, especially if it has gained specific funding to do so.

## 3. Things to think about

When groups work they can make a huge difference to the quality of people's lives. Below are four things that can affect how well a group functions. Under each title there are a few questions to ask yourselves and some thoughts and suggestions.

### Purpose

- What type of group is it? Decide what type of group it will be and be clear about who you will ask to join and why. Your group may have a particular activity in mind, e.g. a project to challenge discrimination, or it may be a support group or discussion group.
- What is the purpose of the group? Develop a written statement about the group's purpose. Include terms of reference so that any prospective members are clear about the purpose. See also our factsheet [How to Constitute Your Group](#).
- Is it time limited or open-ended?

## **Participants**

- Who can join?
- Do people need to have certain experiences, skills or characteristics?
- Is the group size limited?
- Is it open or closed? Open groups are good for networking and socialising, but if there is a lot of coming and going, the group may not reach the crunch stage, although people may bond outside of the group. Closed groups can be useful for developing trust and support, getting work done, and making decisions.
- Can observers or supporters come?

## **Recruiting**

- How will people find out about the group? Ideas for advertising your group include: libraries, community centres, GPs, newsletters, supermarkets, local newspapers and Facebook. See our factsheet [promoting your work](#) for more information.
- How can you make sure you include people from a diverse range of backgrounds? Does this affect where you advertise?
- Do participants have to apply or be referred?
- If your members need to have certain skills, how do you make sure you recruit fairly? You may need an equal opportunities policy and/or a list of criteria for specific roles in the group, especially if you are recruiting to formal decision-making committees.
- Do people need to be voted into the group?
- If the group is closed, will there be an opportunity for others to join later on? If so how and when will they be able to apply?
- How are new members made welcome? Set up welcome procedures for new members including meeting and greeting and information about the group's activities.
- How do you make sure everyone feels included? Good facilitation (below) is important to help ensure that everyone feels included.
- Do you want to have an exclusion policy – in case someone persistently disrupts the group? See the section on **Group Facilitation** below for more information.

## **Taking care and celebrating the group**

- How does the group nurture and look after participants? Consider how the group will support people if they feel upset or have strong emotions about things being discussed, or if they don't feel able to communicate.
- Does the group celebrate birthdays, events, festivals? How is this organised and paid for? You could set up fund for celebrations to which everyone contributes and record dates to be celebrated in a diary.

## **4. Practicalities**

### ***Venue***

What are the needs of the group, and what your budget will cover? How accessible is the venue, how easy is it to get to on public transport, is it quiet and private? You may need a second room to use if members need time out. Approach local voluntary organisations for a meeting room, as they may be able to offer one for free or at a low rate for unfunded groups.

### ***Room set-up***

If the group has a formal role, arrange chairs around a table so that people can read papers and write notes. If the group is more informal, arrange the chairs in a circle.

### ***Refreshments***

Providing basics such as tea, coffee and biscuits for the group is an important way of welcoming people. If you have no funding at the beginning, ask people to contribute a small amount towards their refreshments.

### ***Time and frequency***

Check with the group what times, days, duration and frequency of meetings work best. Once a decision has been made it is important to stick to it, as this helps members feel safe.

### ***Administration needs***

Do you need access to computer, printing and photocopying facilities? You may also need to think about a cupboard or filing cabinet to keep papers in. Again, if you do not have easy access to these, a local voluntary organisation might be able to offer some or you can try your local Centre for Voluntary Services. You can find them on the [NAVCA website](#).

### ***Keeping records***

Think about what information you need to keep about members and how and where you will keep this. For more information about this, see our [factsheet about monitoring and evaluation](#) or the [Information Commissioner's website](#).

### ***Different roles***

You may need people to take on different roles, even at an early stage in the group's development. If one person is facilitator, another can be responsible for the venue and refreshments and someone else for taking notes or arranging the agenda. Later on, roles may need to be more formalised and you may need to elect people into them. For more information see [How to Constitute Your Group](#).

## 5. Group facilitation

Facilitation is about enabling a group to operate; it is about having the group's interests at heart. At times a facilitator may need to intervene in order to keep things on track, asking the right questions at the right time. It can be hard work, but also immensely rewarding when the group is working well together.

### *What makes a good facilitator?*

A good facilitator:

- Helps their group to run smoothly, but this doesn't mean that they are responsible for the group's achievements. The power to function positively is generated from group participants, not focused in a single individual.
- Helps the group feel safe, through retaining a framework by the use of ground rules. However, it doesn't fall to the facilitator to solve all of the problems in the group. It is important that the facilitator allows the problem to be put to the group to solve, rather than control or tell the group what they should do about an issue.

A lot will depend on whether the group facilitator is a member of the group or has been brought in to fulfil the role. If the latter, it will be particularly important that the facilitator creates a safe and positive space for group members to participate and does not to control or impose their own views on the group.

### *Some interventions*

As well as helping the group to work together, facilitator may need to intervene to enable the group to work at different times. Some of these interventions include:

- to start and move things on
- refocus the group, and help it with direction
- encourage participation
- help the group deal with difficult issues, including the use of ground rules
- to help with time management
- help the group make a decision

### *Ground rules*

One of the ways of enabling a group to work well is to establish an agreed set of ground rules for the group. These need to be agreed with all members so that they are giving permission to the facilitator (and other members of the group) to subsequently employ the ground rules if necessary.

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## An example of ground rules: Capital Training project share the ground rules they use in their group meetings

(Capital is for service users and survivors in West Sussex) Training for Trainers © Pavilion 2003

**1 Confidentiality.** Personal information shared in the training sessions should not be disclosed to anyone not present at the session.

**2 Disclosure.** We can learn a lot from each other by sharing experiences but no-one should feel obliged to disclose anything they want to keep private.

**3 Inclusion.** We all need to help each other to participate. In particular, people who are more confident about speaking up (such as people who may already be involved in giving presentations, doing training or as committee members) should remember to hold back at times, to give others a chance.

**4 Participation.** The more you participate the more you will get out of the course. But this should not feel like an unwelcome pressure and it is fine to pass on any activity.

**5 Respect.** There are many differences between us, including how knowledgeable we are, our opinions and our life experiences. Whatever differences or disagreements that arise, we need to treat each other respectfully as individuals. This particularly applies across differences of gender, ethnic group, and other backgrounds and identities.

**6 Behaviour.** It is fine to stand up, lie down, fall asleep, walk up and down, leave the room or do anything else you like, as long as it doesn't disrupt the training session.

**7 Promptness.** The challenge for trainers is to cover a lot of ground in a relaxed manner. That is made easier if people take responsibility for returning from breaks at the times agreed.

**8 Identity.** What unites us is our experience of having been diagnosed and treated as mentally ill. This is the perspective we should speak from.

**9 Speaking in the group.** Whether in small groups or all together, people should speak one at a time and keep their contributions relevant to the topic. When all together, people need to put up their hands if they wish to speak and wait to be invited to do so by the trainer. Also, people need to project their voices and try to speak to the whole group, so as not to exclude anyone with a hearing impairment.

## 6. Top tips for facilitation

- Help to keep the pace, as well as the peace
- Try to ensure everyone who wants to has the chance to contribute
- Remind the group of ground rules, and keep to them
- Listen and encourage others to listen too
- Helping to create a safe framework
- Make participants feel welcome
- Introduce each other, help new people feel comfortable
- Develop rapport
- Ensure good time-keeping
- Challenge or confront if necessary
- End the meeting well: make sure everyone knows when the next meeting is, and anything that they need to do in preparation for next time

## 7. Managing conflict

Most groups will experience conflict at some time. Conflict can help people develop new ideas and learning. However, for people to feel safe and to maintain good group relationships, you might sometimes need to intervene. Below are some situations which might arise, and ways in which you can deal with them.

### *Sharing the space*

If a group member holds strong opinions, hogs the talking, and tries to make the group take on their views and act according to their wishes, it can make other members feel uncomfortable. Here are some ways you can deal with this kind of situation:

- Facilitators can move the discussion back to the group, ask the group's help in responding to the individual's concerns, or move things on.
- Talk within the group about emotions such as anger, frustration, and feelings of unfairness. It can help if the person who is causing tension can explain why something is so important to them, and how the group can help them with it.
- Try to make space for individuals who are worried about appearing disloyal, upsetting others, or lack of confidence in their views so they can have their say too.
- Ask people to write down their concerns on post-it notes. Place the notes in a box for the facilitator to take them, feed them back to the group. In this way, all members of the group will feel that their views and needs have been considered fairly.

### *Using the ground rules*

If someone breaches the ground rules, remind the group about them. Have a procedure that you can use if rules are broken repeatedly. In well-established groups, members can remind each other about ground rules; however people may look to the facilitator to assert them, as it can feel safer and not so threatening to individual relationships.

### *Exclusion policy*

If using the ground rules does not help, and conflict relates to one individual, you may need to think about asking this person to leave the group. You will need to have a procedure in place in order to do this. Exclusion is a last resort and hopefully it will not be necessary in most cases – but it is useful to be prepared just in case

### *Managing emotions and mental distress*

Mental distress can affect someone's ability to participate in a group, and some discussions can raise difficult emotional issues. You can deal with this by:

- Preparing procedures to cover illness, including who to contact. Appoint co-facilitators or deputies and let them know how to access papers, petty cash and keys.
- Making sure group members know that if they are in a 'bad space' they can just come along and 'be' in the group if that helps them. Where appropriate individuals can let the group know what support they might need in a crisis or when distressed. This will partly depend on whether the group acts as a support network or has other purposes.
- If dealing with a subject that raises strong emotional responses, check out how people are feeling at some point in the discussion. Appoint a co-facilitator to carry on with the session if someone becomes upset and needs to go outside for a while.

## **8. Peer support**

A group can be an enormous source of peer support to its members. Together recently carried out research which found that people value being with others who have had similar experiences because they feel understood, they don't have to hide their mental health problems, and can experience genuine empathy. Participants described the value of being accepted into a safe, non-judgmental environment where 'you can be yourself'.

**"We all have our idiosyncrasies but there is a terrific level of acceptance. I feel so comfortable coming in here."**

- [A Helping Hand](#), Together, 2010