

How to Lead a Group

Remember, It's All About Emotional Safety!

PREPARATORY STEPS

- Do your initial points of contact communicate care and professionalism?
 - Marketing, email, phone, outgoing voicemail message...

INITIAL CONTACT

- First impressions really matter when you are dealing with people's anxiety about groups.
- Engage with awareness to the discomfort and distrust they are likely to feel.
- Give yourself a moment to settle before you engage.

WRITTEN INFORMATION

- Anxiety causes most people to not remember things they are told in the first meeting, so written information will greatly support people following the policies, norms and structures of the group.
- Questionnaires prior to the group—good or bad?! Less resistance after one-on-one contact.

ONE-ON-ONE CONTACT

- Biggest single thing you can do to build safety.
- When everyone has some trust and connection with you, they are far more likely to be able to build trust between group members.
- This is done simply by asking things like: what they are hoping to get out of the group, why they signed-up for the group and if they have any questions for you.



PREPARE YOUR SPACE

- Attending to the appearance of the space and yourself further communicates your attentiveness and is thus soothing.

SETTLE YOURSELF

- Take time before to soothe yourself. Breathe. Meditate. Review notes. Talk to a friend. Journal.

BEGIN THE GROUP

- Welcome members and give them an outline of the session.
- Your warmth and making eye contact goes a long way!
- Attend to how they are configured together. If in person, having them equally spaced in a circle helps create equal inclusion. If online, having them unmuted supports a sense of being more in the room together.
- Discuss confidentiality.

SETTLE EVERYONE

- Meditation is a chance to soothe them and yourself.
- Simple physical and emotional body scan.
- Have participants select Hide Self-View in Zoom to increase ease.

BUILD COHESION

- Ice-breaker or just check-ins.
- Check-in: Give them a relevant question and possibly use a timer to give each 2-3 minutes. Tell them the order of sharing so you aren't waiting between sharings and people know when they will be going. If in person you can tell them to go clockwise and if online, list their names in whatever order comes to you.
 - In this demo you could ask, *"What's a weird or bad experience you've had in a group?"* Or, *"How are you doing today?"*
- Learn their names! Write them down in the layout as they are in the room.

TEACH YOUR MATERIAL

It may help to review your agenda again. As you teach, incorporate the following points:

Stay in the watchtower

- Personal—How is each person doing?
- Interpersonal—How is everyone relating?
- Group—How is the group as a whole functioning?
- Don't get caught up in the material and lose track of your participants. People will check-out no matter how brilliant your material is if they are not being attended to.

Model good behavior

- Demonstrate kindness, authenticity, honesty, and vulnerability.
- Don't think you need to be the expert who knows everything. By modeling that you have limits and are human, you make it safer for others to do the same. It's easy to get caught up thinking that you need to provide everything.

Maintain your composure

- The groups leader's presence not only affects the relationship with individual members, but all group members as they vicariously experience the leader's manner of relating.
- The leader's management of their own emotional presence in the service of others is critically important.

Care for everyone

- Contain the talkers:
 - *"Jane, I love how thoughtful and engaged you are and I wish we had more time, but I want to make sure everyone has space to share."*
- Stop cross-talk:
 - *"John, I really want to hear what you are saying and I'd just love to let Alex finish first."* Modeling not interrupting, but also don't want to scold the cross-talker and make everyone feel more anxious.
- Act the first time:
 - By making these types of easy redirects early on, people trust that you will protect the space and tell them if they are doing something outside the norms of the group.

Be kind

- If you are harsh in your holding the boundaries then people will fear your aggression and feel less safe.

Include everyone

- *“Mary, I’d love to hear how you feel about this.”*

Be careful with untimed sharing

- Setting a timer prevents this, but can be less dynamic.

Moment of conflict

- It is the hardest part of running a group. Lots of training goes into how to deal with moments of conflict.
- **Conflict comes from hurt.** Everyone wants to have their hurt heard and understood! Prevent the destructive defenses of blaming or shutting down.

Simpler (*not simple!*) fixes

- Acknowledge and table:
 - *“I hear your frustration and unfortunately we don’t have the space to give this important issue the time it needs. I am happy to discuss it more with you outside the group.”*
 - Then give them space to be really heard and validated outside of the group session.
- Timed sharings:
 - Give people three to five minutes each to share in a clockwise fashion.
 - Encourage people to talk about their own experience only and redirect them if they start talking about others.
 - Prevent back and forth cross-talk.
 - Do multiple go arounds depending upon time and intensity.
- Timed conversation:
 - If the conflict is between two people, use a timer to give them each five minutes to talk while the other person listens. Do two to three rounds as necessary.



Keeping everyone engaged

- Don't talk too long.
- Alternate your lecturing with:
 - Questions
 - Sharings
 - Live demos
 - Have others teach
 - Breaks
 - Break-out groups
 - Movement
- Don't ramble and don't read
- Have an outline, not a word-for-word script.
- How to engage different types of learners:
 - Visual
 - Auditory
 - Reading / writing
 - Experiential

ENDING EACH GROUP

How you end the group affects everything.

- Don't end in a flurry as time goes over—people start to leave, others get distracted, and everyone leaves feeling a bit worked up.
- Limit sharing or check-outs (*one word, sentence, or minute*).
- Take a moment of silence.
- End on time.