APS Virtual Learning Community

A place to connect, communicate, and collaborate

Tips for Facilitating Online Peer Support Groups

**"In times of crisis people want to know that you care,
more than they care what you know."
~~ Will Rogers**

This resource is under development…
…for facilitators of online peer support groups by facilitators of online peer support groups.

Why create these tips?

There is a lot of information available about online technology and online "business meetings," but not a lot about facilitating online peer support groups. So a group of us came together and said, "let's write this together, as peers, based on our lived experience of facilitating/attending these kinds of groups." We've been meeting weekly, having conversations about what we're learning, and adding to this list of "tips" through a collaborative and mutual learning process.

We invite you to join us at one of our meetings. Send a request to join at the end of this page. We currently meet on Tuesdays at 5:15 pm (Eastern). Other facilitators are holding meetings throughout the state on different days of the week, times of day as seen in our Online Support Groups (https://href.li/? http://aps-community.org/online-support/) page. Whether you can join us online or just want to share your ideas and experiences — both from facilitating live support groups as well as attending online groups — we welcome your contributions.

Questions we asked:

(Click a question to jump to discussion about the question)

- What makes an online group good?
- What role does an online facilitator play that's different from "live" groups?
- What is the best format or structure for an online group?
- Are there any other tips that are important to remember for an online group?

Guidelines and Resources we liked:

- Group Guidelines and Principles of Support ("#guidelines)
- Technology Tips ("#tech)
- Resources for Good Groups and Virtual Learning ("#resources)

Acknowledgements and Contact Info ("#acknowledgements)

What makes an online group good?

The consensus was inclusiveness is important. People need to feel welcome, respected, and that they matter. This can be harder to achieve in an online environment.

An ideal group size is 10-12 people. People are able to participate without hiding out or tuning out. If more than 12 show up, the facilitator may use breakout rooms (if available) to divide into smaller groups and ask a co-facilitator, or someone in the small group to lead the discussion. The goal is to give everyone who came a chance to give and receive mutual support.

Having agreements (guidelines, principles of support) about how members will support themselves and each other is important. These might be read by the group and then posted in the chat. Examples of group agreements are provided below.

Consider Technology Inequality

Disparities exist related to access to technology and technical experience. Having everyone on video may not be possible for those without home computers or smartphones. Others may lack experience with the technology. Still others may feel uncomfortable with the way their background (home) environment might show up on video. Whatever the reason, don't engage in video shaming. Meet people where they're at and help them to feel as supported as possible.

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What role does an online facilitator play that is different?

As with in-person peer support groups, the facilitator is still an equal member of the group with an added task of opening up the group, orienting the group to the technology, striving for equal opportunities for sharing during the group, and closing the group.

A good facilitator is neither a teacher nor an expert. A guide on the side not a sage on the stage. To shift from "teacher" to "facilitator" ask yourself, W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking?) Use the role to manage time and discussion so members feel like they contributed or got something of value from attending. The facilitator can chime in with personal examples from time to time, but at the end of the group, all members should feel ownership, like, "we did it for ourselves."

In an online group, the facilitator may need to give newcomers an orientation to the audio and video controls of the technology, such as how to mute and unmute the audio, turn the camera on or off, use the chat, and explain when to use these features in the group.

Co-Facilitators

It is harder for a solo facilitator to manage the technology and the interpersonal aspects of a group. Having a co-facilitator can be helpful. One facilitator can manage the group process while the other can provide the technical support.

For example, the main facilitator can open the group on time, welcome everyone, give an orientation to the format and support agreement, and encourage participation in group discussion. The second facilitator can give the orientation to the technology and keep an eye on video and phone lines for background noise, which can be muted manually if the co-facilitator has host/co-host privileges. This can be very important as echoes sometimes happen when people join from multiple devices (phone and computer at the same time). The second facilitator can also manage the process of creating breakout rooms if the group size becomes too large and the group decides to split into smaller groups.

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What is the best format or structure for an online group?

There are a lot of different group types and formats.

- Open (drop in) groups
- Closed (groups that have bonded over a shared topic or task)
- Support
- Task-focused

The purpose of the group should be clear to all participants, including the time commitment and expectations of participation. As is true of in-person groups, online groups can be chaotic if you don't have an agenda or plan. At a minimum, be sure you know how you will open the group, orient people to the technology, allow sharing during the group, and close the meeting.

Opening the group

Briefly introduce yourself, describe how to mute and unmute and use the Chat feature. Ask everyone to "check in" with something simple like, "tell us who you are, where you are, and what you do." Adding a visual icebreaker, like "show us what you are wearing on your feet," can be short, fun, and helpful to make people feel relaxed.

If you demo a brief and lighthearted introduction, others are likely to do the same.

While members are checking in, jot down a list of who joined to organize the conversation and keep track of who has spoken. This can help you to facilitate giving everyone an opportunity to share something.

Support or Comfort Agreement

Support or comfort agreements are based on mutual support and offer a common language and set of expectations for the way group members will treat themselves and each other with respect.

Some examples can be found below. Adapt them for your own group members. Use principles and a format that works best for the culture of your group.

Invite participants to read the agreements or principles and add items of their own. Ask: "what will help you stay present?" Members might add, "drink water," or "get up and stretch," or "tell a joke and laugh out loud."

After everyone has had a chance to contribute, post the agreements in the chat where group members can see them throughout the rest of the group. The agreement can be revisited and used as a way of deepening the conversation around the values of mutual support.

Language matters. Encourage everyone to use human language and avoid jargon.

Group Discussion

A group may be based on a specific topic, or members may bring issues they want to get support on. In either case, give the format and how they know they can take a turn to speak.

You might go around in a circle, like a "virtual" talking stick, and call upon people one by one in the order they arrived contribute (this is where keeping a list as they enter the group or do the initial check-in can be handy). Or, ask people to raise their hand (you can see it if they are on video) and call upon them. If people are on the phone, be sure to invite them to unmute and say their name when they're ready to speak like, "this is Albert, I have something to add…" Or you encourage a topic in the Chat and call on people from there.

Clearly describe how to join the discussion otherwise people may start talking over each other, which can be frustrating for everyone. Asking people to raise their hand so it is visible on video or saying their name and waiting to be called on if they're on the phone is away for you (as the facilitator) to know when someone wants to speak. **Once a discussion starts, remind everyone to stay on mute unless they are speaking.** Say they may need to be manually muted if they are causing an echo or background noise.

Using the Chat

The Chat can be a distraction for some or it can be a helpful way for those who are shy to speak up. Check with the group about whether using the Chat adds to or takes away from the quality of the group.

One way to use the Chat constructively is to pose a question and ask everyone in the group to redirect their attention to the Chat answer the question or make a comment during the pause.

The Chat can't be used by those who call in by phone, but the facilitator (or a technical support co-facilitator) can invite text a messages to the facilitator's phone number (or a group member) where they can be added by the facilitator to the Chat.

Creative use of cell phones during the group could be a topic for discussion.

Wrapping up the group

Before the end of the group, ask if people came with something they hoped to get support for. If any urgent needs arise, save other topics for the future.

Also ask for those who have been quiet if they have any thoughts or observations to offer the group. Sometimes all it takes is an invitation to speak. But participation is voluntary and everyone can choose to just listen.

Closing the group

Before everyone leaves, offer a way to bring the group to closure. You might ask everyone to say a word or something they are feeling about attending the group. Be sure to invite people to come back and give the dates/times for next meeting.

Some technical tips…

1. Password protect the group, share it with your co-facilitator(s) and if you are on Zoom keep the HOST code handy. It allows you to assign/re-assign a co-host, divide the meeting into breakout rooms, and manually mute people who have background noise while someone else is talking.
2. Keep the phone number and access for the meeting handy, in case you need to call in because of poor audio quality or an unstable internet connection. If you call in while staying on the computer video, turn your computer 'speakers' off. This is different choosing 'mute'. If you're on both the computer and the phone there will be a loud echo that will make it impossible for people to hear each other. Just remember to turn your computer speakers back on after the meeting is over.

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Other Considerations

> *"Being a peer supporter means you're the expert*
> *at not being the expert, and that takes expertise."*
> *~~ Chris Martin, Recovery Innovations*

Avoid being "the expert".

If you're promoting a perspective other than your personal lived experience, creating "teachable moments," or ending every group member's contribution with a summary and your own conclusion about what was said, you're putting yourself in a position of authority over the group. In peer support groups, the facilitator is an equal member of the group, so it is okay to occasionally share personal experiences, just like every other member, as long as it does not done in a way that takes power away from the group.

W.A.I.T.

One way to avoid falling into the trap of becoming "the expert" is to frequently pause and consider the impact of what you are about to say. W.A.I.T. stands for, "Why am I talking?" If you are giving an instruction related to the group process or personal experience that is pertinent to the group discussion, that's fine. But if you're trying to teach something or say something just to "fill a gap of silence," you may instead be taking away an opportunity from those who are shy or take longer to speak up. Allowing time for silence is an important part of good facilitation.

Remember, Language Matters

Language is important. It is also important for people to feel respected regardless of their position or opinion.

The facilitator is not the "language police." Shaming someone is against the principles of support. If jargon comes up that feels uncomfortable or group members disagree with, ask the group questions like, "Help me to understand how it relates to peer support," or "I'm curious about whether there might be a different way to say what you said in a more human way?"

As you explore the use of language with the group, ask people to not take it personally. It is an opportunity to learn with and from each other, and to gain a richer understanding from different perspectives.

When there are conflicting opinions, and someone seems upset or offended, respectfully ask if there is an "elephant in the room." (For example, people may have hard feelings but are not comfortable expressing them.) If an "elephant" is identified, invite the group into a conversation to clear the air. Maybe say, "ouch," or "I'm really sorry, I didn't know," in a genuine way.

Conflict is not always bad. It can raise unspoken issues for all members to discuss and share from their different perspectives, leading to greater awareness of each other's views and the importance of valuing differences.

Use hope, humor, inspiration, positive affirmations, a sense of community and "carefronting" (as opposed to confronting) to address differences and keep redirecting questions back to the group to encourage collaborative learning that come from the wisdom of the members of the group, rather than trying to be the 'expert'. This gives everyone the chance to contribute and to learn together.

"Elephant" discussions can also lead to new additions to the group agreements (or working agreements among facilitators and group members). Any discoveries about new ways for the group to grow together is good. Remember, we're all in the market for growth!

Be Transparent

If you're new to facilitating in an online environment, let people know! These days, people are in a "perpetually learning mode," and most people are patient and forgiving as we are all learning new skills. Those with experience with online technology might step forward (is there a teenager in the room?) and be able to guide and provide extra help in unexpected ways!

We're all peers. Especially when we're in the role of the facilitator. Each of us have things going on too. If we feel overly responsible for making the group successful, we take away the group's ownership of and responsibility for its own success. We can't do it all. We can always do our best but we don't need to be perfect. As peers, it is important for us to be and show that we are human.

If you have thoughts on the tips, warmline connections to share, or other ways for people to get connected during this time of social distancing, feel free to share them with us at _academy.virtual.community@gmail.com (mailto:academy.virtual.community@gmail.com)._

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Guidelines, Principles of Support, and Conversation Starters

- *Group Guiding Principles: Healing Connections (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/hc-guiding-principles.pdf)*
- *Group Guidelines: Hearing Voices Network and Alternatives to Suicide (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/hvn-altsu-group-agreement.pdf)*
- *Institute for the Development of Human Arts (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/idha-guidelines-institute-for-the-development-of-human-arts.pdf)*
- *Big Question Board: Starter Questions for Group Conversation (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/big-question-board.pdf)*

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Tech Tips

Using Zoom? Some "quick tips" for participants

- Simple participant instructions, **click here** (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/hc-zoom-basics.pdf)or **here (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/how-to-use-zoom.pdf).**
- More details for participants, **click here (https://href.li/? https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/resources/zoom-instructions.pdf).**
- A user-friendly video for participants, **click here (https://href.li/?https://youtu.be/9isp3qPeQ0E). (https://href.li/?https://youtu.be/NIYudDeULlw)**

Helpful Technical Resources for Facilitators

- A TED Talk: The secret to making Zoom meetings meaningful, **click here** (https://href.li/? https://ideas.ted.com/the-secret-to-making-zoom-meetings-meaningful-for-you-and-your-coworkers/? utm_source=recommendation&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=explore&utm_term=ideas-blog-3).
- An article to prevent Zoom-Bombing, **click here.** (https://href.li/?https://www.pcmag.com/how-to/how-to-prevent-zoom-bombing)

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Other Resources For Virtual Groups

- *STAR Center: Virtual Learning Guide* (https://href.li/?https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/pacific-southwest-mhttc/product/virtual-learning-guide)
- *STAR Center: Issue on Storytelling* (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/050720-star-center-jan-2019_newsletter.pdf)
- *Leading Groups Online* (https://href.li/?http://www.leadinggroupsonline.org/ebooks/Leading%20Groups%20Online.pdf)
- *The Way of Improv by Dave Morris* (https://href.li/?http://www.thewayofimprovisation.com/)
- *Ottawa Psychiatric Survivors – The Art of Virtual Facilitation* (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/042120-ottawa-psych-survivors-art-of-virtual-facilitation-handout.pdf)
- *Peace Work Tool-kit* (https://href.li/?https://www.heartcircleconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Peace-Work-Tool-Kit.pdf)
- *Finding Steady Ground* (https://href.li/?http://www.findingsteadyground.com/)
- *Community Toolbox: Peer Support Groups* (https://href.li/?https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main)
- *Creating Working Agreements* (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/st.working-agreements.mar-2020.overview.pdf)
- *Stages of Group Development* (https://href.li/?https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_86.htm)

Articles for These Times

- Mutual Aid in the Virtual World by Leah Harris: "Not Fragile": Survivor-Led Mutual Aid Projects Flourish in a Time of Crisis (https://href.li/?https://www.madinamerica.com/2020/03/survivor-led-mutual-aid-projects/)
- Mutual Support in an Age of Social Distancing by Leah Harris: How One Peer-Run organization is Adapting to COVID-19 (https://href.li/?https://www.madinamerica.com/2020/03/mutual-support-age-social-distancing/?fbclid=IwAR1cgcjRAZFnzemg6AevySwSVHApjqu_EPloTh90_36kITHDjXC03sublW4).
- STAR Center feature by Leah Harris: Storytelling for Personal Transformation and System Change (https://virtualcommunityblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/050720-leah-harris-storytelling-in-star-center-jan-2019_newsletter.pdf)

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Acknowledgements

"Never doubt that a **small group** of thoughtful, **committed organized citizens** can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."
~~ Margaret Mead

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Thank you all. Your contributions to the group and to the tips have really made a difference!
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Contact us or Leave a Comment

If you would like information about joining our group or have ideas or recommendations for this page, add comments below or contact us at academy.virtual.community@gmail.com (mailto:academy.virtual.community@gmail.com).
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2 thoughts on "Tips for Facilitating Online Peer Support Groups"

RITAC
March 23, 2020 / 12:10 pm
Comments? Questions? Let us know! ~Rita
academy.virtual.community@gmail.com

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