

Facilitating Virtual Support Groups: Tips and Tricks

Similar to in-person support group meetings, online meetings will have varied expectations about etiquette and norms that are specific to the particular group. For new participants, it may be helpful make supporting materials available online describing group norms for participation. This handout offers a review of the challenges and suggestions facilitators have offered to address these challenges during virtual group meetings

----- What's THE SAME -----

In general, **basic rules of etiquette** that promote a safe, respectful and supportive group environment during in-person meetings **apply equally** in online settings. These include:

- Punctuality
- Civility and avoidance of profanity
- Sharing while being mindful of time and others' need to share
- Avoid distractions and interruptions: set up in a quiet, private space
- Dress as you would for an in-person meeting.
- Avoid distractions: checking email, texts or having other screens, windows or browsers open while engaged in live online support groups decreases the benefit to all. Silence mobile devices.

----- What's NEW -----

Although you may have been meeting as a group for weeks, months, or years, the virtual platform introduces new challenges and justifies the establishment of **new group agreements** and guidelines to address this new environment. Consider these topics:

- **Privacy:** Using headphones and a private space in the home. Talk about what to do if this is not feasible.
- **Engagement:**
 - Camera *on* and *positioned* (eye-level camera)
 - Raise hand to talk – get called on
 - Lighting – be sure faces can be seen
- **Respect:**
 - Guidelines for multi-tasking. How was this handled in person? What behavior would be most respectful to the group?
 - Dress for the occasion – dress as if you are meeting in person
- **Distractions**
 - Background noise prevalent: mute when not talking
 - Be aware of what your camera is showing – strive to keep phone stationary and positioned toward your face
 - If parenting or engaging with others (sometimes a must) – turn off camera

----- **Facilitator Role – New Tasks and Challenges** -----

- **Need for Tech Assistance**
 - Participants need to be oriented to technology
 - Participants may show up promptly, but have difficulty “settling in” with tech glitches
- **Difficulty “Reading the Room”**
 - Managing *technology* AND *process* AND *emotions*: tracking non-verbal communication on tiny screen requires different attention
 - Remembering who has spoken uses a different part of our brain – this is no longer positionally constant.
- **Screen Fatigue**
 - Heightened awareness of own presentation (smiling/focusing/attending) is more tiresome for many
 - Facilitator is more active than with in-person groups

----- **Suggestions to Meet Challenges** -----

- **Start with Re-contracting**
 - If meeting virtually is new for your previously-established group, take time to review “What’s NEW” with the group and agree on group guidelines that promote privacy, engagement, and respect, and limit distractions.
- **Get Help**
 - Assign a tech manager: teaching tech, monitoring chats, organizing breakout rooms. This could be a tech-savvy participant.
 - Assign note taker to track who has spoken – type this into the Chat function
 - Bring along a co-facilitator to focus on visual emotional cues who is comfortable “observing the observable.”
- **Prepare More**
 - Prepare agenda to add structure to chaos
 - Schedule breaks and breakout room activities
- **Engage More**
 - In a regular support group, you strive to be peripheral to the discussion. In the virtual space, you need to be “in the middle” of the discussion. Call on people to unmute and engage, rather than having people talk over each other.
 - Before the group starts, ask everyone to rename themselves with the name they want you to use in ALL CAPS.
 - Mute participants if their background noise becomes problematic.
 - Participants may not realize they are being distracting, or are poorly positioned: engage them early and often to 1) model the agreements you have made with each other 2) minimize disruption 3) re-engage the group and disruptive participant.

- **Work it Out Together**
 - Encourage group input to identify best practices for zoom meetings: when we feel overly responsible for making the group successful, we take away the group's ownership of and responsibility for its own success.
- **Limit the Group Size/Plan for Set Up Time**
 - One benefit of online groups is accessibility – you may have more people signing up. Keep your group to 8-10 participants if you can.
 - Ask participants to sign on 5-10 minutes before the group starts to work out tech issues.
- **Try these activities**
 - Introduce a go-round, "What helps you stay present in this format?" Repeat this from time to time – it may change.
 - For the opening go-round, call on people (based on who you see on your screen) rather than waiting for people to raise their hand.
 - Consider a visual icebreaker:
 - "Show us what you are wearing on your feet," can be short, fun, and helpful to make people feel relaxed.
 - "Everyone get up and bring back something to drink, show us what you chose"
 - Use the Chat Function to encourage shy people to engage: pose a question and ask everyone in the group to redirect their attention to the Chat answer the question.
 - Online game: Everyone turns off their cameras. Facilitator calls out prompt; participants meeting prompt category turn on the camera. Follow this with discussion of the more relevant examples. Here are some examples:
 - Everyone who has ever been to Philly, turn on your camera!
 - Everyone who has a dog, turn on your camera!
 - Everyone who has seen a doctor in the last 6 months...
 - Everyone who has been tested for COVID...