Perinatal Mental Health Project
Caring for Mothers. Caring for the Future.

Facilitating groups in service settings:
a guide for facilitators

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For questions and comments please contact us

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

Facilitate means "to make easy" or "ease a process." A **facilitator's** role is to plan, guide and manage a group meeting to make sure that the group meets effectively, with clear thinking, good participation, and commitment from everyone who is involved.

> A group facilitator is NOT a tutor and does NOT teach the group members.
>
> • Everyone in the group needs to take responsibility for their own learning and for making group meetings a success, not just the facilitator.
>
> • The facilitator is there to make sure all the practical arrangements are taken care of, that all the group members feel comfortable, are given an opportunity to talk at the meetings, and feel part of the group.
>
> • If you think of the group as a car, with each group member being a different part of the car. The facilitator is the steering which **keeps the group going in the right direction**, as well as the oil which keeps the machine running smoothly. The car also has other essential parts like wheels, body, engine etc. which are the other members of the group.

It is important for the facilitator to put aside their personal values, beliefs, ideas and allow everyone in the group to express their own views. This can be difficult, especially if the facilitator has strong views. **Make sure all members of the group have equal opportunities to contribute and learn**. This can be challenging when some members of the group are thought to have more or less power than others. A skilled facilitator will help each member to be assertive and respectful in the meetings. The facilitator needs to help all members of the group gain confidence to speak about difficult and sometimes embarrassing topics. Group members must be able to speak **without fear of judgement** from the facilitator.

Learning to work together is not always easy. The role of the facilitator is to help the group to learn how to work together by providing the structure (process) while group members remain focused on the content. In any meeting, the facilitator must constantly balance process with content. Processes include ways to help people speak to each other and make decisions together, making sure everyone has an equal voice. Content focuses on topics or subjects that are being discussed at the meeting.

This guide gives some ideas for ways to help you facilitate groups of people meeting in service settings. These tools may be used to facilitate **general meetings** or **training workshops.**

2. Participatory methods

Some facilitators may be familiar with the more traditional understanding of a teacher who has knowledge and skills that he/she needs to communicate to the students. This type of teaching/training is based on a **passive learning process**. *Facilitating* a group needs to be more active, with a **participatory learning process**. Facilitating and training/teaching are not the same, although both require a lot of preparation. The table below shows the difference between these two ways of learning.

Passive Learning Process: Training/Teaching	Participatory Learning Process: Facilitating
• Trainer/teacher is responsible and decides what group should learn • Trainer/teacher is in charge • Focus is on the curriculum or subject matter • Trainer/teacher has the knowledge and expertise • Trainer/teacher talks and the group listens • Trainer/teacher provides the right answers	• Facilitator believes that groups are responsible for their own learning and tries to include their goals and objectives • Facilitator helps the group work towards a shared goal • The focus is on the group, and the learning process • Facilitator believes that everyone has knowledge and that individuals will learn from one another • Facilitator encourages individuals to share their experience, ideas and information • Facilitator provides the right questions so that the group can discover the answers for themselves
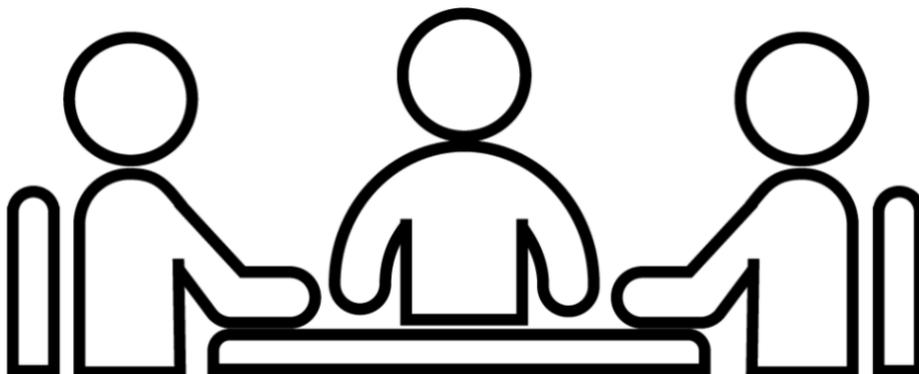
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3. Good attitudes for group facilitators

People do not all learn or respond in the same way.
- Some need to **think about issues** for a while before giving an answer; others need to **discuss** them with colleagues; others need **visual images** to help them learn.
- A good facilitator is **relaxed, helpful, caring and non-judgemental**.
- **Show respect** for the knowledge and experience that members bring to the group. This is valuable for everyone to learn from.
- Encourage group members to **share relevant difficulties** and problems from their professional experience.
- Use discussion, exercises and games to keep the group active and participating.
- The group may be trying to gain new knowledge or skills. For this, they should be **comfortable and cared** for during this process, and, if possible, enjoy themselves.
- **Avoid a "school teacher" attitude**. Don't be patronising, apologetic or too reserved.
- **Attitudes show non-verbally** in facial expression, voice, arm movements, being aware of and responding to participants' physical comfort.

4. Preparation
A good facilitator needs to be well prepared!

4.1 Content
- **Define your objectives** for the session. What results do you want from this meeting?
- Think about the backgrounds and all other characteristics of the group members.
- **Plan the process** of the session: introduction, the stages of the process, conclusion.
- **Prepare notes** for yourself and look at any materials prepared for the meeting or workshop.

4.2 Visual aids/training materials
- Choose materials that are appropriate for the group.
- See that you **have everything that you will need**. For example, check that the computer is working for your PowerPoint slides, flipchart pens are not dried out, and that there is enough flipchart paper and Prestik available.
- Check that handouts are properly put together.

4.3 Venue
- **Set up the room** with enough seating and arrange it to suit the kind of meeting you have planned. You might want to put the chairs in a circle, or U-shape. If a presentation is being made, make sure that everyone will be able to see it.
- Air: very important for concentration, rather cooler than too hot.
- Remove extra chairs, tables, dirty cups, paper scraps etc: anything that makes the room untidy or unpleasant.
- If possible, prepare the venue beforehand: check visual aids, lights etc.
- Check that the toilets are clean and in good working order.
- Check where catering will be set up and that all the details for this are arranged.

5. Conducting a session
The process of running a group is really important.

5.1 Introducing the session
- **Introduce yourself** and other facilitators. Give the participants the opportunity to introduce themselves.
- Unless surprise elements are built into the session, clearly announce the objectives, scope, administrative arrangements etc. for the meeting.
- Be interested and enthusiastic. **Use a warm and friendly voice**.
- Make sure everyone knows what the meeting is about and the timing for the day.
- Check that people know where the toilets are.
- Set ground rules for the meeting. Rules for how people need to behave, to respect each other and get the best from the meeting.

5.2 Running the session

- Communicate by using verbal and nonverbal messages (see sections below).
- Be very careful about how you give instructions for an activity. Give the instructions for each stage of the activity only when that stage happens. If necessary, repeat instructions to help participants understand what they are meant to do. **Check that everyone understands**.
- If you use visual aids and handouts, give these out with the relevant instructions.
- Give out the handouts and refer to them only when they are needed.

5.3 Presenting knowledge or learning points

- **Start with a positive approach**. Establish contact with participants; prepare them by telling them what you will do and why it will be interesting for them to know.
- Remind participants why the meeting is important for them. Use humour and offer personal points of view about the material.
- **Use uncomplicated visual aids.** These are helpful if they are specific personal examples that participants can identify with.
- **Vary the pace**. Use brief activities, get opinions from participants, and ask them for their own examples.
- **Vary your body language** by lowering your voice and making eye contact with different people. This helps participants keep their attention and interest.
- **Do not read your notes**. This gets very boring!

5.4 Concluding the session

- Always **end a session with a conclusion**. This may a summary of what has happened, or pointers to the next module.
- A self-reflection exercise is a good way to end a session.

5.5 Joint facilitating

- If more than one facilitator is involved in a session**, clarify who is doing what**.
- Spend time beforehand discussing with your co-facilitator how you are going to work together, the process, including the instructions you will give and the timing.
- Avoid private messages, such as glances or notes, between facilitators. These could be thought of as being superior to the group.

6. Communication

Communication can be both verbal (what is said) and non-verbal (what your body says).

6.1 Verbal communication

- **Encourage participation.** Don't call on people to give answers, rather go round the group in order giving everyone a chance to speak.
- **Give clear instructions** and use gentle humour.
- Refer to participants' good questions or answers. Mention the name of the person responsible to show that you value what they have said and take them seriously.
- **Avoid a one-on-one discussion** with a participant that is not relevant to the others in the group.
- **Stop side conversations** of participants from taking place, either by holding up your hand, or making eye contact, or asking politely for silence. Do not scold.
- Watch for when **people get bored** or sleepy. Have a short break if possible.
- When the group, as a whole, is asked during an activity for opinions, it can help to allow participants the time to write these down first.
- **Do not ask too many questions** at one time. This becomes confusing.
- If questions are known, write them up on a flipchart sheet so that participants can see the question and remind them of what they are answering.
- Avoid general questions such as "Any comments on that?" Rather be specific.
- Do not over-emphasise the process, for example, by saying "We're running out of time".

6.2 Non-verbal communication

Voice
- Everyone should be able to **hear everything** that the facilitator says.
- **Keep your voice interesting**. Speaker louder and softer so that it is not all the same.
- **Make sure a group member is heard** when they are speaking and seen by all. If necessary, ask the group member to raise his or her voice or to stand in front of the group.
- A faster pace maintains energy. A very slow way of talking can be boring.

Body language
- **Avoid repetitive body movements** such as pacing, fiddling with a pen, swinging one's legs, looking at your phone etc.
- **Face participants with your whole body** towards them. If necessary, turn so that you can see all the members of the group.
- **Move between the participants** when you can, so that you are not stuck in the front of the room.
- **Avoid standing behind a table** or lectern for a long time. Physical barriers like these create psychological distance between the facilitator and group members.

Eye contact
• Move so that you can see everyone in the group.

Use of space
• **People do not work well in crowded spaces**. Rooms should have as much space as possible.
• Decide if it is helpful or not to have participants sitting at desks or tables in the room. If not, and participants need to write, they will need something to press on. Also see that there are tables at the back or side of the room, for glasses and water, paper and so on.
• A "school room" set-up, with participants in straight rows facing the facilitator is not a good way for people to participate and learn. Circles, semi-circles, or other **less formal arrangements for chairs** and tables are better.

The learning environment
- There should be few distractions and **a peaceful atmosphere**. You may need to make regular requests for cellphones to be switched off and for people to avoid side conversations.
- Use of outside areas for group discussions can be good for participants, but often create distractions or people sleeping instead of participating. Use outside areas during less important activities to vary the setting.
- Before starting a session, after tea or lunch breaks, or on the next day, **tidy the room and set it up** for the next session.

Management of time
- Try and **stick to the times** planned for the meeting.
- Watch when people start getting restless or begin going to toilets too often. This usually means you need a short break. One-and-a-half hours is the maximum length of time to keep people sitting during one activity.
- **Do not mention being rushed for time**; this creates stress.
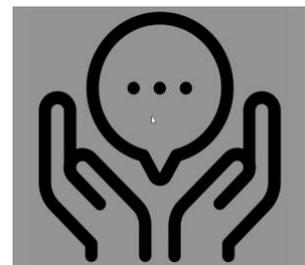
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7. Group dynamics

7.1 Group decisions

- People feel more comfortable **giving a group decision** or opinion. This stops individuals from feeling stupid or not knowing what to say and encourages more discussion.
- Allow the group members to come to their own conclusions. Do not interrupt their discussions with your opinions. **Give feedback afterwards.**
- Groups "own" their decisions, as well as the space they have been using. Allow a group to give an answer from their space, or if participants return to a plenary (big group) set-up, allow small working groups to sit together.

7.2 Group seating and physical arrangements

- **Break the big group into smaller groups** for different activities. Change where they sit. This keeps people from getting bored.
- **Move people around** so that they are sitting next to different people. This creates greater diversity and stops participants from speaking to the same people all the time.
- After small group discussions, try to **avoid long reports** back to the big group.

7.3 Facilitator's role during group discussions

- The facilitator is not part of a group and **should not interfere** with the discussion. They need to give clear instructions, check that everyone understands, make sure everyone is seated where they should be and keep a check on the time.
- **Check how the discussions are going**, and if everyone has had a chance to speak before moving the big group back together again.
- See that **different people have a chance to report back** to the big group. Tell participants at the beginning of a meeting that everyone is going to have a chance to speak at some time. This stops some people from being the main speakers.

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8. Use of visual aids

8.1 Flipcharts
* **Use clear writing** for flipcharts. Green and yellow colours are not easy to read.
* **Use participants' own words,** but in summary, when writing on the flipchart.
* **Group answers together under headings** so that it is easy for participants to get a clear and full report.
* **Write down important learning points**. Not individual points of view.
* Write down things that need to be done or **"Action Plans"** as these are suggested during the workshop.
* After the meeting, **share the Action Plans** with everyone who took part in the meeting.

8.2 Computer projection/PowerPoint slides
* **Check that everyone can see** the projection. Avoid standing in front of the screen and blocking the view!
* Use a sharp-ended pointer or LED light, rather than fingers for pointing to the screen.
* **Keep slides simple** to avoid confusion.
* Slides should have **few key points** on each. Keep the font size big (24 size or greater!) and clear. Use simple diagrams and flowcharts – and colour to make slides look interesting.

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8.3 Use of manual/handouts
* Only refer to a relevant page in the manual when you want participants to look at it.
* Distribute all handouts, for example, course evaluation forms, only when they need to be used. This stops people from looking at them when they should be concentrating on something else.
* If you are using many handouts during a meeting or workshop, **put them all together in one book**. This gives participants a useful resource to take with them. Include blank pages for notes.

9. Post-meeting follow-up

All good trainings (and general meetings) should benefit the participants, helping them to discover new knowledge, attitudes, and skills. These should increase performance, personal growth, and development for the individual and the organisation.

- **Create a sheet for 'Improvements'** to list suggestions that participants make for how they can improve their situation.
- **Send Action Plans and Improvements lists** to participants. This gives a record of what they have decided or discovered through the training/meeting.
- **Measure whether objectives have been achieved.** For trainings, ask the participants to answer these questions:
  - What were the objectives for the training?
  - Has the training achieved its objectives?
  - Did the participants gain the knowledge or skills they were taught?
  - Can they use what they have learnt in the workplace?
- **Evaluate how effective the training was** through (only some may be useful to you):
  - Participant action plans
  - Post-course questionnaires
  - Follow-up interviews
  - On-the-job observations
  - Supervised special projects
  - Regular performance appraisals

10. Dealing with difficult situations or behaviours

Learning and effective working in groups takes place if people feel safe.
Participants need to feel that they will not be criticised, rejected or punished for giving their ideas, questions, concerns or talking about their mistakes.

Some people might show **difficult behaviour** in a meeting or training. The reasons could be they:
- Feel alienated from everyone around them
- Are used to being rejected, disrespected and ignored (in their personal or work lives)
- May use conflict as a way to get attention – even negative attention is better than none at all
- Tend to attack those closest to them or those in authority
- Are not able to see their behaviour is disruptive to the group
- Have trouble feeling empathy
- Tend to blame others

Curiosity and active listening can help us to avoid making judgements. Empathy can help us make different responses to deal with the behaviours. Don't punish, try to take a different approach.

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The table below has suggestions for how to manage difficult behaviours.

Topic	Situation	Intervention
Conflict: Personal Attacks	**Individual Attacked** A group member targets other members.	1. Use gentle humor: If you don't know this group or the individuals, look at reactions and body language. Say nothing the first time unless you are sure that it was meant. Make a light comment like "I hope that comment isn't an indication that we need armour for this meeting." 2. Restate the ground rules: Make eye contact with attacker and say, "Our ground rules clearly state that… We welcome all ideas, comments that build or clarify ideas etc., but not negativity." 3. Confront person directly: firm words, supportive tone and stance. Then redirect him/her with "What is the concern you have with the issue/idea? How would you change it to improve it?"
	Group Attacked	Use the first 3 points in the block above. 4. Ask the team. "How do you feel when the person makes this type of comment?" 5. Personal Confrontation: If the attacks continue and the group does not want to say anything then speak to the person at the break.
Side/private Conversations	A member of the group is having private conversations with other participants when someone else is speaking	1. A friendly reminder: "Just a reminder, we agreed to 'one conversation at a time' in our ground rules for today." 2. Direct the reminder: Make eye contact with person/people involved and restate, "One conversation at a time please." 3. Personalize it: "Nolu, do you have a clarification question for Sam?" or "Nolu, I can see that you have something to contribute; when Sam has finished we'll hear from you." 4. Make a direct request: "Nolu, please hold your comments until Sam has finished."

Topic	Situation	Intervention
		5a. If Nolu is the only one interrupting or having private conversations, talk to her at break, one-on-one. 5b. If there are many people interrupting or having side conversations, put the process on hold and ask the group "Do we need to take a break?" *Note*: If other participants are reacting to the material, suggest "parking the issue" while completing the current item(s). Address this/these new topics after the speaker or the agenda topic discussion ends.
Returning From Breaks	Group members are late returning from breaks	1. Light reminder: "Remember, you agreed to return from breaks on time because it helps us finish on time, it's one of our ground rules." 2. Just before the next break remind the group to be back on time and advise them of when that is. You may want to lighten the tone by suggesting that you all synchronise your watches.
	Group members are chronically late returning from breaks.	1. If it is the same members each time, then remind them when they return. 2. Ask for input: "Out of curiosity, why do you have a ground rule that says return from breaks on time, and yet several people are late returning from break each time? What do we need to do for this to work?" 3. Facilitate a discussion around the ground rule and expectations – perhaps there aren't enough breaks, or they are too short, members may need some flexibility from time to time to accommodate other needs – build it into the schedule at the start of the meetings.

Topic	Situation	Intervention
Staying on Time	The group has a lot to cover in their agenda, but they seem to get distracted and talk about other topics	1. Remind of the "keep focused "ground rule: Suggest the use of a *Parking Lot* to capture items that need to be talked about later. 2. Specifically re-focus on the particular topic/agenda item: "I'd just like to remind you that we are discussing item 4, please hold discussion on other topics until we get to them." 3. The discussion has continued for some time, and you are running out of time for the item, attempt closure of item: 1. "We have 10 minutes remaining for this item. We need to re-focus. What do we still need to discuss to conclude this item?" 2. "We are almost out of time for this item, there appears to be more discussion needed, is that true?" 3. Follow-up a yes response with, "What do you need to finish this discussion?" or "Why are we unable to close this discussion?" 4. 4. If the item is important and wasn't given enough time for discussion and action, give participants a choice on how they spend their meeting time: "Is this item more important than the remaining items on the agenda and if so, when will you address the other items?" *Note*: The answer should *not* be to keep going until all the items are completed.
Aggressive behaviour	These people do not want to be in the workshop, think it is a waste of time. They are often loud, rude and critical. Their behaviour stops others from contributing.	1. Give them time to make their point, and do not argue with them, listen patiently, and use peaceful language. 2. If necessary, speak to them outside the meeting during a break, asking for their help to make this meeting work well.

Topic	Situation	Intervention
Complaining behaviour	A complainer can find everything wrong, the venue, the coffee, the temperature of the room, the time etc.	1. Listen to their complaints and acknowledge anything that is true. 2. Then agree to address concerns outside the meeting. Deal with immediate matters during a break and take up other issues later.
Know-it-all behaviour	Some people are keen to express their opinion and show their expert knowledge of a topic, even when they are not real experts. They have strong opinions and speak up. They are the first to answer every question, often not allowing others to be heard. This may be a sign of feeling insecure.	1. Recognise their valid experience and knowledge so they know they have been heard and appreciated 2. Gently and firmly deflect the conversation and ask another person their thoughts or experiences on the matter. You could say, "Jon, you clearly have so much experience with this and feel that a,b,c are important. Alice, as you have work in x situation, you may have different ideas. It would be good to hear from you." 3. Lead by example – show that it is OK not to know everything. "I don't know how to manage x problem very well. Are there others in the group with ideas?"
Always agreeable behaviour	These people often don't share their true opinion because they are afraid of upsetting someone or being criticised. They smile and nod but don't necessarily agree with what others say.	1. Challenge them to express their true opinions 2. Ask them to contribute first from time to time.
Negative behaviour	These people see it as their role to give the opposite view. They undermine the facilitator and other participants by doubting the truth or reliability of what others say.	1. Stay neutral. Don't agree with their criticism of others. 2. Accept different viewpoints but keep the meeting process working. 3. Depersonalise their opposition, make it about the process or the principle but not about the person.

Topic	Situation	Intervention
Stalling (delaying) behaviour	Some people don't want to make a definite decision about anything. They want more information or want to decide later.	1. Find out why they don't want to make decisions. Find out what additional information they need. 2. Encourage them to make small decisions even if they don't have all the information.
Silent behaviour	Some people just refuse to speak. They sit quietly but will not give their opinion, even when asked to do so.	1. Refuse to accept non-participation or withdrawal. 2. Ask them direct open questions, then wait for an answer, using silence as a motivator. 3. Speak to them in a break to encourage participation.

Notes

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