

for New Facilitators

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Questions about this package

Who is this package for?

This package was put together to assist those who want to know what some of the basic elements are in facilitating a new group.

What are these elements?

The three elements that are useful in facilitating any group are centering, listening, and assertive expression. To further expand on what it is and the various ways to approach it, each element has been given its own one-pager.

Why only these 3 elements?

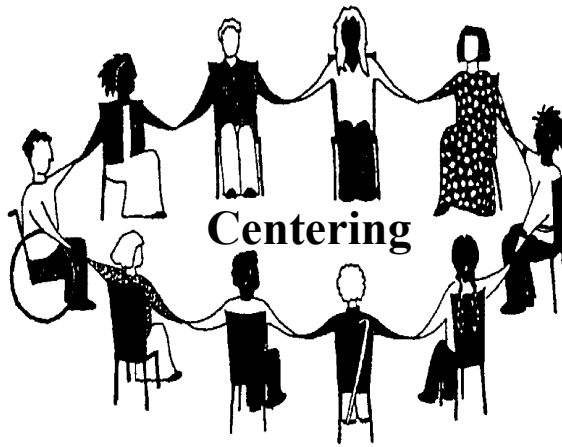
For those starting a self-help group, the prospect of facilitating can provoke nervousness. Understanding that there are a few basic elements required to begin, and that they make sense, can go a long way to reducing a new facilitator's anxiety. We hope this will prove to be the case for you as you begin to facilitate your group.

After I apply these elements, what comes next?

For those who would like to build and expand upon their (co)facilitation skills, please see "So you want to be a facilitator? A preparatory toolkit."

For more information or assistance, contact:

Program Co-coordinators, Ontario Self-Help Network (OSHNET), toll free 1-888-283-8806 or email: oshnet@selfhelp.on.ca OSHNET provides consultation, resources, networking, and training to anyone involved in or supportive of self-help/mutual aid initiatives across the Province.



The purpose of centering is to prepare yourself, and the group, in your role as facilitator by: leaving behind the cares of the day; deciding to focus on what is about to happen in the here-and-now; and taking a moment to pause, breathe, and think about the reason for this group's existence. There are many approaches to centering, so each person must find what works best for them. Below are several different ways to center, and some suggestions on when they might be useful. Experiment with these examples until you find those that fit your personal style and are also comfortable for others as well.

Being Prepared

The first recommendation is to be prepared for each meeting, whether that means having an agenda ready, copies of the guidelines to hand out, assembling a crisis/information binder with extra copies should they be needed, or reviewing what happened from the previous week that might still be on people's minds. Some people also arrive early to set up the room and get the coffee going, or whatever other basic tasks need to be accomplished before people arrive. Being a little early prevents co-facilitators from rushing in out of breath, arriving flustered, or frustrated about being late due to traffic.

Using the Breath

For centuries people have meditated by using the breath as a way to calm the mind. Take a few moments to sit comfortably, and focus on inhaling/exhaling gently.

In addition, we may sometimes get so caught up in whatever is happening in group that we forget to breathe. If you become aware this is happening, take a deep breath, hold and then exhale it slowly. Whenever you find yourself becoming agitated or emotional, try this approach until your breathing returns to its' normal rhythm.

Visualization

For some, visualization is another effective approach. Some people visualize their favourite quiet spot, others see themselves growing roots and anchoring themselves, ready for whatever mood the group may be in that particular day.

Using the Body

There are several ways of using the body to bring yourself into the present moment. One of the easiest is to deeply massage the palm, each finger, and the backs of both hands, and then each ear until you can almost hear the blood flowing through your arteries. The sensation caused by this massaging technique will bring a warm rush followed by a sense of relaxation. From this calm center you are then ready to begin facilitating.

Centering Quickly

Sometimes we don't have the few moments necessary to get deeply centered and have to make do as best we can. For those harried moments when you have little preparation, try taking a deep breath, lift one foot and bang it down on the floor, repeating the action with the other foot. This physical action can quickly

ground your attention in the moment and help get you through to your first scheduled break. If not, try one of the other techniques listed above during the break, or invite the group to refocus by using one of the suggestions listed below.

To Center a Group from the Beginning

Ask people to begin the group with a check-in – say 25 words or less on how they are feeling beginning the group. This technique tends to bring everyone’s attention into the room, while giving the facilitator a sense of the group’s mood. Other quick ways to center the group are: using a number (from 1 to 10) or a colour to describe people’s emotional state as the group gathers; asking everyone to tense and then release their muscles once or twice to “get present;” playing a piece of classical music, such as Yo-Yo Ma’s cello suites; have everyone visualize themselves relaxing in preparation for their group; or ask group members to offer their suggestions for getting the group off to a good start.

Centering During Group

Sometimes people can become so distracted or upset that they have difficulty focusing at all. Providing some form of structure, such as a thumbnail agenda, may help them feel grounded enough to get back on track. Should anyone become angry or upset, calling for a break can be a good first step. When the group reassembles after a 15-20 minute break, suggest a quick visualization or hand massage. Bringing people’s attention back to the group’s purpose and guidelines is another way of refocusing people’s energy. However, if you sense that people are still distracted by meeting’s end, try a calming meditation over quiet music so they have time to get grounded before hurrying back to their busy lives. Or end on a positive note by asking everyone to share one thing they are looking forward to between now and the time the group meets again.

Centering After Group

Whether the group meeting has been unfocussed or without incident, it’s always helpful for organizers to take a few moments and talk about their experience: what went well, what could be improved, and who will handle the next meeting. This is also an opportunity for co-facilitators to discuss their feelings, agree on assigned roles, and finally, to leave the group’s business behind until next time.

So, after all this effort, how will you know when you are centered?

- You are more able to give group members your undivided attention without your mind wandering off into your own thoughts
- You are more able to listen for the emotional content in others’ expressions
- You are more able to understand and accept others’ feelings as theirs, and not about you or your feelings
- You are more able to set clear boundaries about what you will or won’t, can or can’t, do**

Adapted excerpts from *The Art of Listening: Participant Manual*, page 15, by the Self-Help Resource Association of British Columbia.



It has been said that hearing happens, but listening is a choice (Ron Meiss). Yet the ability to listen can be one of the most important elements in maintaining a successful group. However, it is surprising to discover that the average adult misses out on 75% of what's being said¹. Why? Because our brains process what is heard at a much faster rate than it is being spoken, leaving us with lots of opportunity for other thoughts to intrude on what is being communicated.² Given that, what exactly are we listening for, and what is the best way to respond?

What to listen for

As the listener, try and listen for three things: content, intent and sentiment. What are the actual words being said? What is the speaker's purpose in providing this content? And what feelings are being expressed – vocally, facially, and through the speaker's body language? Listening for these things will help the listener in a number of ways.

People tell us things because they want to connect, to belong, to get any number of wants and needs met. However, when they don't feel listened to, a number of things can happen for them, including becoming angry and frustrated, endlessly repeating the same information, withdrawing, sabotaging others' contributions and even leaving the group. To try and prevent that from happening, we need to answer two questions for ourselves: what blocks me from listening well, and how can I be a better listener?

Blocks to Good Listening

Some of these blocks are old favourites, others reserved for special occasions, but everyone uses them. The following examples are an opportunity to simply become more aware of the different types of blocks that get in the way of good listening. They are: comparing, mind reading, rehearsing our responses, filtering, judging, trying to always be right, day dreaming, identifying so strongly that we interrupt with our story, advice-giving, debating, changing the subject/making jokes, or being nice and agreeing with everything to head off conflict.³

However, when we use these blocks, we are not listening. In fact, we are not even fully present to the speaker. If instead we want to be present, we need to practice what has been called "radical presence" (Mary Rose O'Reilly), or deep listening (Thich Nhat Hanh). This is the ability to be fully present and receptive to the speaker's words, without any judgment or assumption getting in the way. Opening one's self up to the thoughts, feelings, wants and needs of another and trying to understand with the heart, and not just the head, takes skillful practice – but it is a skill that can be learned.

Empathic Listening

There is a little-used word in the English language called “fellowfeel” – the ability to step into another’s skin, heart and brain, and understand them in ways beyond words. But how to get there? Here are several elements required to be an empathic listener⁴:

Attending: To attend means “to pay attention to.” Think of those times in your life when you really wanted someone to listen to you. What specific things did they do which confirmed that you really were being listened to? Did they: make eye contact; sit facing you and observe your facial expression and body language; lean toward you; nod, smile, or mirror your own gestures; encourage you with “Mmhm,” “Really?”, “Yes,” or “Say more;” and give you the time to finish saying whatever you wanted or needed to say, without interruption? Chances are they did, while occasionally trying to get an even clearer understanding of what you meant through the use of paraphrasing, reflecting and clarifying.

Paraphrasing: To paraphrase is “to try and put another person’s ‘content’ into your own words” and see if that is what they meant. This means keeping it short, using the same key words the speaker has used without adding anything extra, and being honest about what you think you did or did not understand. Be careful not to repeat everything word for word, as this can be seen as disrespectful parroting and can be interpreted as making fun of the speaker.

Reflecting: To reflect is “to mirror back to the speaker” the feeling and intention behind the actual words they’ve used. Sometimes when the speaker doesn’t know why they are giving you this information or even how they are feeling about it themselves, you can reflect back what you think they are saying to see if that is accurate.

Clarifying: To clarify is “to make clearer” and usually involves asking short questions of the speaker so as not to lose track of the story line. However, the listener does not need to understand every detail -- only those pieces which are vital to the speaker’s story. Asking too many clarifying questions can feel like an interrogation and trigger anger or defensiveness, so it is advised to keep the clarifications to a minimum.

Above all, remember that it is the sentiment or emotional content which the speaker is hoping you will grasp. To really believe an empathetic connection has occurred, we need to know that the feelings surrounding the facts have also been heard and understood.

Below are some examples of what empathic listening might sound like:

"So <i>you</i> think that..."	"It seemed to <i>you</i> that..."
"What <i>you</i> need now is..."	"...Pretty tough (for <i>you</i> then/now), huh."
" <i>You're</i> anxious about..."	" <u>Really</u> mystifying" (to <i>you</i>)..."
"Seems <i>you're</i> unsure of..."	" <i>You</i> were <u>furious</u> with me then!"
"Wow! Really confusing (to <i>you</i>) !"	"So <i>you</i> felt <i>you</i> were up against..."
" <i>You're</i> really feeling..."	"They <i>totally</i> missed <i>your</i> point!"
" <i>You</i> were frustrated enough to chew rocks..."	"Now <i>you</i> <u>look</u> really..." ⁵

(1) Marino, P. (1997). Listening, the often ignored skill. Found at http://www.furninfo.com/absolutenm/templates/Article_Retailing.asp?articleid=1399&zoneid=7 ; (2) Mountain Wind (1998). The lost art of listening. Found at www.breath.org/alchemy/listening.htm ; (3) Davis, K. (1957), *Human relations in business*. McGraw-Hill Book Company; (4) The art of assertiveness: Participant Manual. Self Help Resource Association of BC; (5) Gerlach, P.K. (2005). Quoted from Empathic listening: Listen with your heart. Found at the Stepfamily Association of America website <http://sfhelp.org/02/listen.htm>



Each one of us has a personal space – a physical, mental, and emotional boundary unique unto ourselves. Naturally, in a self-help group, your personal space will interact with that of the other members, sometimes in ways that trigger anger, defensiveness, confusion, or a sense of being pressured or overwhelmed. Experiencing such feelings are an indication that we believe our boundaries are being crossed and in order to protect ourselves, we have to decide how best to respond. However, in order to do that, we need to know which behaviour will produce the most effective result: will being passive, aggressive, or assertive protect my personal boundaries or compromise them? First, here are some definitions for these behaviours.

Passive behaviour usually means remaining silent, or refusing to honestly express one's feelings, wants and needs. Being passive can be a viable option, particularly when there is a sudden escalation and you are concerned about personal safety. There are a number of benefits to being passive such as: avoiding conflict; gaining others' approval; limiting one's responsibility; being looked after by others; and controlling other people's choices. However, consistently responding this way can leave people with the impression that they can say or do anything and you will go along, even when it is not in your best interests.

Aggressive behaviour involves stating one's feelings, wants and needs without regard for those of other people. Aggressive people may loudly dominate conversations, make pronouncements on behalf of the group, overpower the agenda and insist on having the final word on any topic being discussed. The benefits to aggression are: getting your needs met; protecting your interests; having others do what you want; and being rewarded for such behaviour with the material trappings of "success." However, when people are constantly aggressive, conflict is inevitable and sometimes can lead to others simply leaving the group.

Assertive behaviour involves stating one's feelings, wants and needs while taking into consideration those of others. The advantages to being assertive include: reducing the frustration of not saying what you want or need; having more fulfilling relationships; and feeling good about yourself even when your needs do not get met. However, being assertive brings the challenge that others will not listen, accept, or agree to your boundaries, and in fact may apply passive or aggressive behaviours in an attempt to get you to change your mind. Being assertive requires a clear sense of one's self and a belief in the value of fair and equitable relationships based on honesty.

So, if you decide that a situation requires an assertive response, what would that look like? Here is one way of describing your thoughts, feelings, wants and needs, in a way that might be more clearly heard and understood by others, without blame or criticism:

OBSERVATIONS

1. Stating what I see or hear, without describing it in critical or judgmental language:

“When I (see, hear) . . . you slam the door to my room”

FEELINGS

2. Reacting emotionally to what had just happened:

“I feel startled and anxious . . .”

INTERPRETATIONS

3. Interpreting what that action/behaviour “means”:

“. . . because I interpret your actions as a way of scaring me.”

NEEDS/REQUESTS

4. Asking for what I would like you to do differently next time, if you are agreeable:

“In future I would appreciate it if you would not slam my door. Would you be willing to agree to that?”

Since the purpose of this model is to help people be assertive, there is an additional component, which co-facilitators can use when helping group members explain what is happening for them; Example: *“When you see/hear ... you feel ... because you interpret the other person’s actions to mean ... and you would appreciate if they did instead. Would they be willing to do that?”* This can be a useful approach when someone struggles to express what is upsetting him or her and how it can be addressed. However, there is no guarantee that using this model will be successful. What it does guarantee is that the speaker has been as clear as s/he can be while respectfully, and non-judgmentally, asking for what s/he wants and needs. Simply because this method many not be familiar to others, there may be resistance or outright dismissal of the process, so prepare to be patient and persistent. You’ll appreciate yourself more in the end, and hopefully, so will the other person.

Credits: Content for this fact sheet has been drawn from a variety of sources, including: Bolton, R. (1979). *People skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts*. Touchstone Books, New York; Rosenberg, M.B. (2005). Adapted from *Nonviolent communication: A language of life*. Puddle Dancer Press, California; *The art of assertiveness: Participant manual*, Self Help Resource Association of British Columbia.