

“Guidelines for OM:NI Groups”

**OLDER MEN:NEW IDEAS (OM:NI)
INCORPORATED**

WHERE MEN BECOME MATES



January 2011
Revised February 2017

www.omni.org.au

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Material for these Guidelines has been drawn from many sources, some now difficult to identify. Material has been sourced however from Ralph Roughton "On Listening" Friends Journal Oct 1 1984 and from Factsheets produced by the Mental Health Association NSW Inc. The authors express their appreciation for the use of these materials in this training document. RK, HS.

Introduction

When people first come across the mnemonic “OM:*NI*”, they question what the initials stand for. When it is explained that the letters stand for “ Older Men: New Ideas”, a common reaction is to ask “What are these new ideas?”

This manual is full of the new ideas on which OM:*NI* is founded. You will find them in the general concept of men expressing their feelings to other men who devote their whole attention to what is being shared. This is a new idea in the experience of most men. When you enlarge on this sharing experience adding the qualities of confidentiality, trust, equality, companionship, support, respect and lots more, we have new ideas aplenty. It is these qualities of companionship which make OM:*NI* such a resoundingly successful and constructive experience in the life of so many older men.

Our intention with these training notes is to assist groups by providing ideas about the conduct of group meetings and dealing with important issues that groups encounter in conducting their meetings. These suggestions are to be taken as just that: suggestions. We acknowledge that a valued characteristic of all OM:*NI* groups is that they are autonomous. However the principles that underpin the operation of OM:*NI* groups are made clear throughout the “Guidelines” but in particular in the sections on “OM:*NI* Groups” “OM:*NI* Goals”, and “What OM:*NI* is and is not”. Keeping to these principles has made OM:*NI* so successful. We staunchly support them because OM:*NI* has found that operating on these principles has made OM:*NI* a uniquely rich experience for men. Without the guidance of these principles, OM:*NI* would be that much the poorer.

These training notes were prepared using material that has been developed by OM:*NI* members over the many years in which OM:*NI* has been successfully operating. We have not identified authorship, but appreciate the contribution these men have made. Some of the content will be familiar to you and some not so well known. We have been selective in choosing what we think is most appropriate and useful. Your response to our choice would be appreciated.

Older Men: New Ideas – More about these “New Ideas”

Traditionally men are expected to be in full control of their emotions. They have not been encouraged to share their feelings with others nor have they developed the skill to listen to others in eye to eye contact and with full attention.

New ideas promoted by OM:NI

- Providing the opportunity for and actively encouraging, the sharing of feelings, opinions, concerns and joys with an attentive and caring audience.
- Encouraging men to learn to listen to others without interruption. In doing so they show that they care. This is active listening. Men help other men by hearing their story, by giving that personal story a place in the life of the group and by sharing wisdom. No other men’s group fosters sharing and listening skills as basic practices.
- Giving the opportunity for men to not only talk about their health, but to encourage one another to treat their health as important and to take action about it. It has been said that OM:NI is about helping older men to reach emotional maturity. Again no other group has this as an objective.
- Insisting on complete confidentiality about designated confidential sharing within the group.
- Supporting equality and respect for others: men are arranged in a circle. A completed circle adds intimacy and feelings of emotional safety in the group. This arrangement allows eye-ball to eye-ball contact among all men in the group.

These are just some of the *New Ideas* for Older Men that we support in OM:NI groups. You can think of many more. So when a stranger asks “What *New Ideas* do OM:NI men have?” OM:NI members can respond in a positive way with some sense of pride that they are involved in a group that has thought through these ideas and practises them in community service for the benefit of older men.

OM:NI ‘s *New Ideas* make a difference to the lives of all members and this benefit flows through to those who are friends and relatives of OM:NI members.

The Idea of OM:NI

OM:NI (Older Men : New Ideas) is an organisation for men over the age of 50. Members include self-employed businessmen, professional men, men from middle Management , men from the land and tradesmen so membership is a cross section of the community. Working through small community-based groups with about 10 to 15 members in each group, OM:NI addresses older men's holistic health needs: not only their physical, but emotional, mental and spiritual health. OM:NI groups are unique in creating a safe, male-only sharing environment. Over time, older men address significant issues that have prevented them from enjoying full and enriching lives. The mission of OM:NI is "*To enhance the wellbeing and lifestyle of older men*".

The isolation and loneliness most men experience, even in the company of others, is relieved in an OM:NI group meeting by the men letting go of the competition and fear that is developed from years in the workplace and its culture. Many men acknowledge in their group that this is the first time in their lives they have experienced this new type of relationship with other men.

When men leave the work force, are bereaved, face health problems that are life changing or relocate, huge gaps and changes develop in their lives. They begin to face new issues, about health, family, friends etc. New caring roles and the capacity to be resilient in the face of loss and grief may need to be developed.

Often, retirement causes a dramatic change in a man's life and being able to talk to others who have gone through the same experiences is very helpful. At a typical OM:NI meeting, men talk about their life stories, their joys, their hopes and their sorrows. Worthwhile friendships result from these open and confidential discussions. Most of the members are married but find that OM:NI is a welcome change from the normal round of domestic duties and family obligations. In fact many wives have been instrumental in encouraging their husbands to join OM:NI and continue to support and encourage their husband's attendance.

OM:NI groups offer a place where men discuss things on a little deeper level than is usual in a club or hotel atmosphere and members also arrange other activities to suit their needs. OM:NI men are free to discuss any topic of general interest. Life stories and experiences are very popular. Personal issues, health issues, retirement problems and relationship issues can be revealed in a safe, confidential environment.

Outcomes of OM:NI membership include an increased interest in the positive opportunities of retirement and better communication and listening skills frequently remarked on by family members, by friends and others. OM:NI men feel a clearer

sense of direction and purpose in their lives. This then leads to greater willingness and confidence to become involved in family and community events. Wives and other family members report improved companionship and reduced time their men spend in isolation.

All men need the companionship and authentic support of peers they can trust, in a climate of confidentiality and caring as found in an *OM:NI* group. These factors empower a man to take greater control of his life, leading to a richer, fuller and more satisfying existence.

What *OM:NI* is, what *OM:NI* is not

***OM:NI* IS ...**

- older men meeting in the company of other older men; mateship, making friends and belonging;
- a place where men listen to other men sharing joys, sorrows, hopes and achievements;
- a place where men share knowledge and experience on many subjects;
- a place where men can rebuild their self-esteem and are respected by their peers;
- a group where it is safe to speak your mind in a non-judgmental environment;
- a base from which men earn community respect as honoured elders;
- about men's health – physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, sexual, economic and environmental.

***OM:NI* IS NOT ...**

- party-political, racist, sexist, ethnic-exclusive or denominational;
- another dinner club or service club;
- an activity club – clubs for bushwalkers, stamp collectors, gardeners, wood turners, photographers, etc. already exist and can be attended in addition to *OM:NI*;
- a revenue-raising organisation, but groups may seek sponsorship for initiatives within the community;
- a men's liberation movement;
- anti-women in any way.

Principles underlying OM:NI groups

SHARING

The process of sharing sets OMNI groups apart from all other men's groups. Sharing your feelings or experiences is always optional. If you do not want to speak in the group, that is OK. If you want to share something you have read that you have found helpful, or a technique which works for you, there will be time for that.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Some groups declare part of the sharing as "confidential". Any sharing during that designated time is confidential and stays in the group. It is OK if you want to talk outside the group about any confidential sharing you may have had, but it is not OK to talk about anyone else's confidential sharing. Sharing not designated as "confidential" is OK to discuss outside.

ACCEPTANCE

We all need to be accepted as we are. We do not need to be judged or criticised by others. Most of us are very good at doing that for ourselves. There are no right or wrong ways, for us, or others. All of us however can grow and develop with the support and caring of others.

RESPECT

Respect others' opinions and do not interrupt when another person is speaking. Do not give advice unless requested. Most of us just need to be heard. We do not want people to tell us what to do.

DISCUSSING PERSONAL ISSUES

Once group members know your background, discuss only your own personal issues in the group. Discuss what is happening for you in the present as much as possible,

NON JUDGMENTAL

We need space where we can reveal and face our feelings whatever they are, without judgment and with time to do so at our own pace.

EQUALITY

We sit in a circle to indicate that all are equal. We rotate the facilitator for the same reason. We accept however, that some members may not want to act as facilitator and that is OK. We think however, that the opportunity for each member to facilitate the meeting leads to an increase in self-esteem and encourages feelings of equality in the group.

When you do share, speak from "I". If you need help, it is OK to ask.

The Format of a Typical OM:NI Group Meeting

An OM:NI meeting typically lasts for 2 to 2½ hours, and may be followed by a meal or other group activity. A facilitator runs the meeting, and he may choose other men to run various parts of the meeting. This sharing of facilitating leads to an increase in participating members' self-esteem and fosters equality in the group. The format of the meeting varies from group to group, but there are some typical elements of the meeting.

1. Welcome: Members welcome each other in the meeting room. Facilitator welcomes new members inviting them to say a few words. Seating is usually in a circle with no empty chairs. If members leave early their chair may be removed.
2. Apologies: received and absent members inquired about.
3. Quiet Time: One minute is spent to relax body and mind in preparation for listening and interaction with each other in the group.
4. Relaxation: Some groups do physical exercises; others may have a sing song.
5. Sharing (Regular Check-In): Each member has about 5 minutes uninterrupted to share what has been significant to them since their last meeting. This is not compulsory for every member at every meeting. Everyone in the group practises “active listening”.
6. Some groups designate a special time which is for “confidential “sharing. Matters discussed during this specified time must not be taken outside the group. Non confidential sharing may be about events over the last fortnight since the last meeting. Members may agree that information shared during these sessions is OK to take out of the meeting.
7. Housekeeping: Any notices, meetings, and other organisational matters are discussed.
8. Tea and Coffee Break: There is a break of approximately 15 minutes. This time is very valuable for lots of face to face discussion. This is a really important part of the meeting.
9. Discussion Session: The break is followed by a discussion of a topic chosen at the previous meeting. A typical discussion topic might be: *What could you decide to do this year to make it one of the best years of your life?*”
10. Decision making: about who will facilitate the next meeting and deciding on the discussion topic.
11. Check-Out: Each member takes about 1 minute to say how the meeting was for them.
12. Closing the meeting: The meeting is formally closed. Sometimes members will join in a circle to celebrate the closure of the meeting with the promise to attend the next planned meeting.

Election of a Treasurer

In most OM:NI groups, a contribution of a few dollars may be made at each meeting to pay for tea, rent of the premises etc. An annual per capita subscription is paid to the OM:NI Central Office by all OM:NI groups. Currently the subscription is \$10 per member.

In order to manage these collections and payments and account for all group funds, OM:NI groups should elect a Treasurer. The Treasurer would take responsibility for collecting the tea and rent money at each meeting, ensuring that the annual subscription is made to the Central Committee, accounting for all payments and other receipts as well as making application for grants and sponsorship. Rotating the treasurer’s position would enable others to gain experience and lessen the load.

Listening Skills

The skill of listening is often not at all apparent when men engage with other men. This is because this skill needs to be learnt. The uninterrupted sharing process within the OM:NI group is one time when men give the speaker their undivided attention. This requires men to LEARN TO LISTEN.

There are a number of principles of what we call “active listening”. The following points will help facilitators get the idea of “active listening” and hopefully apply these techniques in their facilitating role.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as it may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen, not talk or do – just hear me.

When you do something for me that I can, and need, to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy. But I can do for myself. I am not helpless, maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I stop trying to convince you and get about the business of understanding what’s behind this irrational feeling. And when that’s clear, the answers are obvious and I don’t need advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what’s behind them. A silent listener lets you work it out for yourself while you are talking about these feelings.

So please listen and just hear me. And if you want to talk, wait a minute (or two) for your turn, and I’ll listen to you.

Facilitating an OM:NI Group

Code of Ethics for Facilitators

The code of ethics below is to assist OM:NI group facilitators maintain a consistent and ethical approach for all OM:NI groups.

Group facilitators agree to:

1. Keep and protect the confidentiality of group members by clearly defining:
 - What it means
 - Why it is important
 - The risk and difficulties involved in its enforcement.

2. Respect and encourage the voluntary participation of group members so as to improve and foster each man's sense of self, well-being and connectedness.
3. Refrain from imposing personal agendas, values, attitudes and morals on other group members.
4. Not record group sessions without the permission of the group members.
5. Not use any therapy technique or strategy in the facilitation of an OM:NI group.
6. Disclose information to all Group members about activities in which they may participate.

The Role of the Group Facilitator

The main role of the group facilitator is to provide some level of structure for the meeting, as well as to assist members to feel comfortable in the group. The facilitator's role is *–to facilitate* " which means---*to make an action or process easier---*. Facilitators therefore make the conversation and sharing that happens in OM:NI groups, easier.

Tasks and Responsibilities of the Facilitator

Welcome new members. OM:NI Groups periodically have new men turning up, therefore it is important that the group is open and welcoming, so new members feel comfortable. The warmth and comfort of a group of men who know each other well and may come from similar social and/or cultural backgrounds, can actually become a real barrier for new members contemplating joining the group.

Here are some ideas for making new members feel welcome and accepted:

Have some longstanding members of the group responsible for making new members welcome - maybe they could introduce the new man to other members before the meeting or during the coffee break;

At the start of the meeting acknowledge the new man (men), welcome them to the group and explain the purpose of the group;

Make sure each member introduces himself to the new member;

If you have any printed information about the group hand it out to the new member;

Encourage members to have realistic expectations of the group;

Recognise that it is his first meeting and that it might take a while for

the man to feel accepted and trust be built up to enable him to open up. Encourage all the men to create new friendships within the group. It would be helpful if one existing member would make personal contact with the new man during the following week.

What NOT TO DO

- DON'T believe that the group is 'your' group. It is essential that group members all feel that they have 'ownership' of the group.
- DON'T dominate and monopolise the discussions.
- DON'T dictate what the group will discuss.
- DON'T lecture or preach or lead members to believe that you have all the answers.
- DON'T attempt to run a therapy group.
- DON'T breach confidentiality

Some Commonly Asked Questions

What are the roles of Chairman and Facilitator in OM:NI groups?

Chairman as facilitator

There may be some confusion in terminology when the facilitator or guiding role is termed chairmanship. Chairmanship often means a level of formality that involves having secretaries and other organizational positions as well as motions to decide issues and a position that is long term. Chairmanship at that level of formality and continuity, has no place in the conduct of OM:NI groups. You could say that chairmanship in this sense is not an OM:NI concept. Indeed you will find that members join OM:NI to get away from the level of rigidity that we find with this idea of the role of chairman in more formal organizations.

However, we can legitimately use the concept if we acknowledge that the process of conducting an OM:NI meeting is one of facilitating or guiding and that the process is one in which we enjoy companionship in a trusting, confidential, non judgmental, secure, relationship where all members are respected and valued for themselves, not for any position they may hold, and where all have the opportunity at some time, to take the guiding and facilitator role.

Rotating the facilitator role

One of the bases of a good workable democratic system is equality among the members. Equality is one of the principles underlying the operation OM:NI groups. No one person should have greater access to the advantages of the group than any other. Electing the facilitator, guide or chairman may be democratic but denying the role of facilitator to all except a few chosen members is certainly not.

Facilitating the meeting can be a real growth experience for members. Many may have never done it before and experience a real sense of achievement when they have the chance to do so. The appointment of facilitator in some groups is made alphabetically. This works well. So if we want to use the term chairman, we certainly may, but let's acknowledge that in OM:NI terms it means guiding or facilitating.

Now we need to put our focus on facilitation, which of course this manual does.

Facilitating

We may call the person taking control of the OM:NI group a facilitator, a guide, a chairman *or a facilitator*. We have adopted the view in these Guidelines that facilitating is what the facilitator, guide or chairman of an OM:NI group does to assist the operation of the group. So facilitating means leading, guiding or chairing (chairing: in the non-formal sense that is used in OM:NI groups). We conclude that there is really no useful distinction between the terms chairman (in the non formal sense), facilitator, guide and facilitator.

We argue therefore that whoever leads an OM:*NI* group needs all the knowledge and all those skills that we have outlined in this training guide. This role, which we have called “facilitator” for convenience, is the main target of the training that we have in mind.

It is our view that all men in an OM:*NI* group should share in the training in some way through discussion and recommendation perhaps under the guidance of one assigned member. We believe that making this document available to all members may help.

Some groups use the term “facilitator” to refer to the “contact person” in the group to whom the Executive Committee or the OMNI group send all communications and who represents the group at the AGM. This contact person may also be the one who makes sure that the principles of OM:*NI* are adhered to, but that differs among OM:*NI* groups. For convenience and continuity, this person may take on this task as contact person for a significant period of time. Some groups have annually appointed contact people to serve this purpose. As a full member of the OM:*NI* group, the person with this responsibility still has his turn as chairman when it comes up, perhaps alphabetically.

What Unites OM:*NI* Groups?

There is room for individuality in OM:*NI*. What works best for one OM:*NI* group may not be so successful for another and each member gets something different from his membership in an OM:*NI* group. However all OM:*NI* groups are united in the common spirit of OM:*NI*. This gives members and groups a sense of belonging to a much wider assembly.

There are some proven practices that improve the odds that a men’s group will be fulfilling for its members. OM:*NI* groups that have adopted these practices and also constantly reaffirm them find that they work very well. These practices are part of the spirit of OM:*NI* that keeps us united and focused on the purposes of OM:*NI*. We have listed some of these practices:

- A relaxed tea time on arrival helps members settle in and meet new members or those who have been absent for a while;
- Members greeting each other with a handshake on arrival;
- Beginning the formal meeting by exploring the reasons for those who are absent and recording apologies;
- A period of silence prior to sharing to distance ourselves from daily interaction;
- Members of the group, seated in a horseshoe, sharing their feelings uninterrupted by other members but not being obliged to share;
- Focused, patient and active listening to provide an environment in which the speaker has the full attention of the group making authenticity in the sharing more likely;
- Having a designated facilitator to monitor the interaction and offer reminders

- about agreed on procedures;
- Rotating the facilitator so that all can have the experience and to demonstrate equality in the group;
- Allowing a question time following the sharing in which members have the opportunity to ask each other about significant issues that arose in the sharing (probably not where the sharing has been designated as “confidential”);
- A discussion topic that focuses members on issues they may never have thought about and to develop respect for the experiences and ideas of others;
- A means of concluding the meeting which expresses group fellowship, belonging and the wish to meet again.
(There are lots of ways of doing this including members standing in a circle, linked hands crossed and clasped, repeating together the words: “Thanks for Caring, Thanks for Sharing, Keep coming back”).

OM:NI provides a forum for discussing, sharing and innovating ways of managing personal issues. OM:NI sharing creates paths towards the acknowledgement of problems and the discovery of solutions. In OM:NI, “*Men Become Mates*”.

Why has OM:NI become Incorporated?

Incorporation protects the organising committee in respect of litigation. Generally speaking, officers of the incorporated body are liable for only the outstanding amount of their subscription. But the step taken to incorporate by OM:NI has greater significance than this.

Originally COTA (Council for the Aging) administered the OM:NI operation and held the ownership of the OM:NI logo. COTA’s policy has been to establish community services for the aged such as OM:NI, and then hand them over to appropriate organisations in local communities. They did this successfully with Meals on Wheels.

Consistent with this policy, there came a time when COTA decided to cease its administration of OM:NI and sought some organisation to take responsibility for OM:NI. A number of members of OM:NI groups decided that this would be possible and negotiated with COTA. COTA made it a prior condition before deciding to hand the name over, that there be a constitution that they would approve, an organising committee encompassing all NSW OM:NI groups, and evidence that the takeover group could manage its finances. In other words that the takeover group would be a viable organisation in which COTA could have confidence. If all these conditions were met, COTA would allow the new organisation to register the name “*Older Men: New Ideas OM:NI Incorporated*”. The action to incorporate was therefore one of the requirements of COTA. The alternative was that COTA would cease administration of the OM:NI operation and retain the name OM:NI. This would have meant the end of OM:NI as such.

The process of incorporation has united OM:NI groups in New South Wales yet at the same time has not produced an over regularised organisation. OM:NI groups are

still locally based, independent, self supporting groups. However we do have a constitution.

Incorporation has:

1. given groups a sense of belonging to a wider enterprise, facilitated support among groups and generated fellowship among all OM:NI groups in NSW. Groups in Victoria were established by OMNI NSW but are currently operating under the auspices of COTA Victoria;
2. promoted the opportunity to share interesting information and ideas about what we do in our groups through our newsletter, through our Annual General Meeting and through informal get together meetings with neighbouring groups;
3. supplied a valuable means for democratic decision making and the contemplation of important issues to be discussed at the AGM;
4. conferred recognition to OM:NI as a viable organisation in the community,
5. provided status and legitimacy through the Office of Fair Trading, underpinning our badges, banners and slogans;
6. legalised a basis for receiving grants (as an incorporated body);
7. enabled us to take out public liability insurance cover for those groups needing this;
8. identified a central point of reference for the activities of otherwise isolated OM:NI groups and
9. promoted OMNI through the setting up of a website which carries the text of these Guidelines as well as information about the history of OMNI and its purposes. The website has proved a useful means for informing aged care operators and other services about what we do and is a contact point for prospective new members. Most of you will see other advantages in the way we are organised. At the present it seems to be working very well with dedicated volunteers acting as an executive committee.

What is the Sharing in OM:NI groups?

Sharing is a unique feature of OM:NI groups. We have listed some points which are guiding principles for the process of sharing. Some OMNI groups differentiate sharing that is confidential and sharing which is not. Members indicate which type of sharing they are engaged in. Where sharing is designated as “confidential” the following rules apply:

1. *One person speaks at a time.* Interruptions in the sharing convey the message that what is being said is not important and denigrates the speaker.
2. *There are no distractions from others.* Note taking and distributing papers or reading circulated material detracts from the process of sharing. The sharer gets the impression that the member is not interested in what he is saying.
3. *Listening skills are fostered.* Listening validates the importance of what is being said, creates rapport and gives confidence to the sharer. Many men have never experienced a group of their peers engrossed in the sharing and giving the sharer

their undivided attention.

4. *No questioning of the speaker during “confidential” sharing time.*

5. *Confidential sharing has to be personal.* It deals with how the member feels. We expect “I” statements not “You” statements. The more personal the sharing, the closer other members feel towards the sharer and this leads to a greater depth of the sharing in the group. The sharing session could begin with the facilitator making this point to the group.

6. *Body language is a valuable key to members’ responses.* The impact of one member’s sharing may be apparent in the body language of another member. Any comment about what the facilitator has noticed about the response to the sharing might be best made, one to one, at the conclusion of personal sharing when there is a break in the program.

7. *Members are reminded about confidentiality at the end of the “confidential” session.* “Remember guys, this is our personal time and our sharings stay in the group”.

In general sharing where the sharer has no wish that their sharing would be “confidential” , different points may be made:

1. Questioning the sharer often diverts the process of sharing and takes time. It often leads to discussions that stretch beyond the contribution of the sharer into new fields. It interrupts the sequence of sharing. If a member is really interested in questioning, the member can note down the question in order to ask it later within or outside the meeting. Some questions may open up matters that the whole group has an interest in and those questions could be asked in discussion time.

2. There is a time limit for speaking. Some members may tend to dominate the group by taking extended time for their sharing. In large groups by the time the last members get a chance to speak a lot of time has passed. The sharing should be kept moving.

3. It is pretty tough to try to exclude the telling of a joke by the member as part of their sharing or by members of the group. Some jokes are hilarious. Humour is encouraged as long as it is not used as a means to avoid personal sharing.

4. Members in the general sharing need to be kept on track. Some members may wander in their sharing or in discussing the topic and this may become boring for others. The facilitator brings the sharer back to the point of their comment. **THE OMNI MEETING IS QUALITY TIME. IT SHOULD NOT BE WASTED.**

5. Each sharer names the next person to share. This aids the flow and brings members into the group.

6. All members are thanked for sharing. This is done by the facilitator.

The first edition of “Guidelines” was written in January 2011. It was compiled by Ray King (Wagga Wagga OM:NI Group 1) and Herb Sowter (Charlestown OM:NI Group). This Revised Edition was prepared in December 2016 and submitted to a reference panel from the OMNI Executive in 2017.