



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

“Facilitating OM:NI Groups”

January 2011



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.

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 become real barriers for new members 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. 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.

- **Ensure Confidentiality** - It is important to emphasize what is spoken in the room -stays in the room.
- **Provide Safety** - by fostering a supportive, trustworthy and friendly atmosphere. This is accomplished by enforcing the guidelines, group goals and time limits on discussions by voice, timer or bell.
- **Encourage Participation** - Not every member immediately shares with the group. Over time, the facilitator will gently encourage members to participate but will be aware of feelings and limitations. The facilitator finds out what members want from their meetings and ensures that all decision making is fair to all members .
- **Provide Access and Equity** - It is essential to create an environment in which all members of the group regardless of race, religion or disability have equal opportunity to participate. This means taking the time and effort to discover what people's needs are and develop practices to ensure that these are met.
- **Provide Focus** - by tactfully redirecting conversations that are not related to the current topic (some men go off on a tangent which may be irrelevant to the topic).
- **Create 'Active Listening'** – 'Active' listeners are sensitive to what is, and what is not said. Look around the group for boredom, talking, hands up for interjection and detect open and subtle pain or grief in another, and respond to these. If you believe the group has ignored an important point, go back to it.
- **Foster Personal Responsibility** - Facilitators should not exclusively enforce the rules of the group. Members should also have an obligation to the group's welfare and be encouraged to extend their comfort zones.
- **Encourage Self-esteem** - Let members know that they are valued as individuals and that their sharing is important to the group and thank them. Don't permit personal attacks on any member during group meetings. Also include and encourage humour in the group.
- **Handle Problems** – Some members may try to monopolise the discussion in the group, become angry and in conflict, question others too aggressively, or violate group guidelines in other ways. A good facilitator deals with these situations tactfully through a combination of appropriate comments and actions.
- **Share** - Facilitators should NOT forget that they are also group members. They should share feelings and experiences when appropriate.

- **Promote Honest Feedback** - Obtain feedback from each member on how they feel at the end of the meeting. Be prepared to be up front.
- **Formally conclude the meeting** - Shake hands with each member and invite them back to the next meeting.

Useful Skills for Facilitating

Regardless of the group facilitator's background, it is important to have or at least develop the skills and attributes below:

- An interest in and an understanding of the purpose of an OM:*NI* group and an understanding of the other members of the group, to create trust and loyalty;
- Good listening skills and eye contact;
- An understanding and appreciation of others' thoughts and feelings;
- The ability to be non judgmental - as a group facilitator you need to be open to other men's different experiences, values, beliefs and opinions;
- The ability to resolve conflict and deal with difficult situations;
- An awareness of your own capabilities and limitations - the group will sometimes not meet the needs of all its members and will not find a solution to every issue discussed.
- Encourage members to have realistic expectations of the group.

What not to DO

- Believe that the group is 'your' group. It is essential that group members all feel that they have 'ownership' of the group.
- Dominate and monopolise the discussions.
- Dictate what the group will discuss.
- Lecture or preach or lead members to believe that you have all the answers. Attempt to run a therapy group.
- Breach confidentiality.

Sharing the Role of Facilitator

As mentioned earlier, when thinking about setting up a support group it is a good idea to check if there is another man interested in assisting you to start up and co-facilitate the group. Establishing and facilitating a group can take a lot of time and energy. Sharing the responsibilities with someone else can mean less work for you and make the experience more rewarding.

There are several advantages to sharing the facilitation of an OM:*NI* group. These include:

- Tasks and responsibilities of setting up and facilitating the group are shared.

- Facilitators can provide support for one another.
- If one group facilitator cannot attend a meeting there is someone else to take their place.
- Having another facilitator, can give you extra moral support when starting up a new group
- Two or more facilitators will bring different skills, experiences and ideas to the group.
- New ideas can be easier to conceive with two heads rather than one.
- Facilitators can debrief with each other after the meeting.
- It is another way of training a group member to become a facilitator.
- Groups that share responsibility for facilitating the group amongst all the members report that members feel more personally involved with the group and have increased self – esteem.

How to Make Co-Facilitation Work

While co-facilitation of the group has many advantages, It also requires effort on behalf of both facilitators, for it to be successful and become a positive experience for the group.

The following points will help make co-facilitation a rewarding and positive experience for all:

- Both facilitators need to be clear from the start about their role in the group and who will do what.
- Allow time together to plan each meeting.
- At the end of each meeting facilitators should discuss issues that arose during the meeting and allow time to debrief.
- There must be good communication - facilitators need to be able to discuss their differences, problems and tensions with each other.
- There needs to be agreement about the objectives and purpose of the group.

Disadvantages of Co-Facilitation

If there is conflict between the group facilitators or the above points are not taken into consideration, co-facilitation can be a negative experience for both facilitators and group members.

Negative consequences include:

- Significant differences between facilitators will be observed by group members and may make them feel uncomfortable in the group.

- If one facilitator 'takes over' the other facilitator could feel undermined, leading to tensions between the facilitators.
- Facilitators will be less focused on the needs of the group and more concerned with their differences.
- Group members will not return and the group may collapse.

Understanding Group Dynamics

A knowledge of some basic concepts of Group Dynamics can assist a facilitator understand what is happening in the group and aid the facilitation process.

Group dynamics can be defined as looking at the *why, when, what, and how* of a group. It is about observing the group as a whole, the interaction between individual members, and the members' interaction with the facilitator, to gain an understanding of what is happening in the group. So the *who* is also important.

One example of the *why* would be the group sitting in silence. Silences may be productive: members may be contemplating some issue and thinking about their response. The facilitator needs to decide whether this is a situation where he should do something to get the group going. The facilitator could observe the group and ask himself the following:

- *Is it just a working silence where members are just thinking hard about a particular issue and how to respond to it?*
- *Is there a lack of trust or a high level of anxiety in the group?*
- *Is it that there are a lot of quiet people in the group?*
- *Is it because the group doesn't understand or have interest in this particular topic?*

The following questions suggest a number of rules of thumb that may guide the facilitator in his management of the group's interaction. He need not stop to ask himself each of these questions but rather have them in mind during his monitoring of the group. With experience, working through this checklist becomes automatic.

When should I Monitor the Dynamics of the Group?

- At regular intervals, for example, every 5 minutes.
- At the end of each session.
- When something unexpected happens.
- When something expected doesn't happen.

Who do I Consider?

- The individual participants.
- The group as a whole.
- The group facilitator.

What do I Consider?

- Levels of trust.
- Patterns of communication.
- The environment.
- The content.
- External factors
- The stage of development of the group

Group Theory

There are different theories about the stages that groups go through and like group dynamics, they can help group members and the facilitator to understand what is happening in the group.

One popular theory describes the stages a group goes through in terms of *forming, storming, norming and performing* (Tuckman, 1964).

- *Forming* - Groups begin by members getting to know each other, integrating and getting clear about why they are there.
- *Storming* - Group members might have different ideas things such as how the group should work, its objectives and who should be included. These differences will cause them to 'storm' with one another.
- *Norming* - As the issues get resolved and the 'storms' subside, group members generally establish agreements (often unconsciously) on roles, leadership, guidelines, objectives and operating norms.
- *Performing* - The group is now ready to perform and do the work they set out to do.

According to Tuckman, these stages are predictable and inevitable to some extent for every group. They can go quickly or seemingly take forever. Understanding that the group you facilitate is likely to go through these stages can help you understand what is happening in the group.

Looking After Yourself

As the group facilitator it is important to look after yourself. Starting a new support group can be exciting and rewarding but can also take a lot of time and hard work. It is important that you look after your physical and mental well-being. Feeling overwhelmed or stressed could jeopardize your own health and also have an unfortunate effect on the group's functioning. While support groups are important, they are not worth putting at risk your own well-being. Below are some ideas on how you as the group facilitator can take care of yourself.

- Proper nutrition, sleep and exercise are the basics for good health. Make sure you stop and take time for yourself to do all three.
- Treat yourself to something you like after each group such as lunch, hot bath or chocolate. Consider it your reward for taking the risk and responsibility of facilitating the group.

- Reflect on positive things that happen, not just the negative.
- Ask group members for feedback - they will be less critical than you.
- Share responsibilities and tasks with other group members - let them know how you are feeling.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed and there is no other designated facilitator, ask for help from other members in the group.
- Take time out from the group if need be. The group can still carry on and you will probably return to the group refreshed and with more energy.
- Recognise your own limits

* Taken in part from *'Support Group Training Kit' NSW Mental Health Association*

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January 2011*