

Group Leadership and Facilitation Skills

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

1. understand and describe some key group leadership and facilitation skills such as focusing group communication, guiding group interactions, resolving conflicts, and working with group processes
2. identify how the perspectives and theory of strengths-based and anti-oppressive approaches can guide facilitation skills
3. think about and discuss your own leadership style and values
4. discuss the benefits and challenges of working with a co-facilitator to facilitate a group

Introduction

In our experience, it is common for new group workers to feel intimidated at the prospect of facilitating a group session. To effectively facilitate a group, you have to assume a leadership role. Do you know what your leadership style and preferences are? Have you ever been in a leadership role? If so, how would you describe your approach? If these questions are confusing, we encourage you to think about them while you are

reading this chapter. There is a lot going on in a group, from interactions between you and group members, to interactions between you and your co-facilitator(s), to interactions between group members—not to mention the content that is being delivered and discussed. Moreover, group interactions are often conveyed via body language and other nonverbal cues, which reflect the group process. You might not directly see or hear group process, but you can usually feel it. In this chapter, we will discuss group leadership skills and group facilitation tasks. We will also discuss working with a co-facilitator(s). If you are currently feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of facilitating a group, this chapter should help you feel more comfortable with this role as you gain an understanding of what it takes to be an effective group leader and co-facilitator.

Group Leadership Skills

Keep in mind that new group workers use and build on the communication and helping skills that they have already gained through their professional education to facilitate group work. These skills include demonstrating mindful listening and using reflection, as we discussed in Chapter 1, as well as showing empathy and warmth, asking open questions and clarifying communication, and attending to feelings. The important point to remember is that group facilitators purposefully and intentionally draw on numerous skills to assist group members in various ways. For instance, as a facilitator, depending on the type of group you are facilitating, you probably want group members to learn about and understand each other, build a sense of group cohesion and belonging, and promote mutual aid. You might also need to assist members to resolve conflicts.

According to Toseland and Rivas (2001), group leadership skills include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. Tasks related to facilitating the group process, such as attending to group members, focusing group communication, guiding group interactions, and making group processes explicit;
2. Tasks related to ongoing assessment, such as summarizing and analyzing information; and
3. Tasks related to action, including modelling and role playing, and confronting and resolving conflicts.

No matter what skills you are using, when working from an anti-oppressive and strengths-based approach, a leader and facilitator always tries to work in an egalitarian way with group members by emphasizing their strengths and skills and what is going well in the group. This type of leader/facilitator always respects group members' contributions and incorporates their feedback and guidance. Figure 4.1 shows the group leadership and facilitation skills that we will discuss next in this chapter.

Attending

Attending skills include both verbal and nonverbal behaviours. These include conveying warmth and authenticity through your words and demeanour, and maintaining appropriate eye contact and body language. As your group begins, one of your roles as a facilitator is to help members feel welcome and comfortable. You can

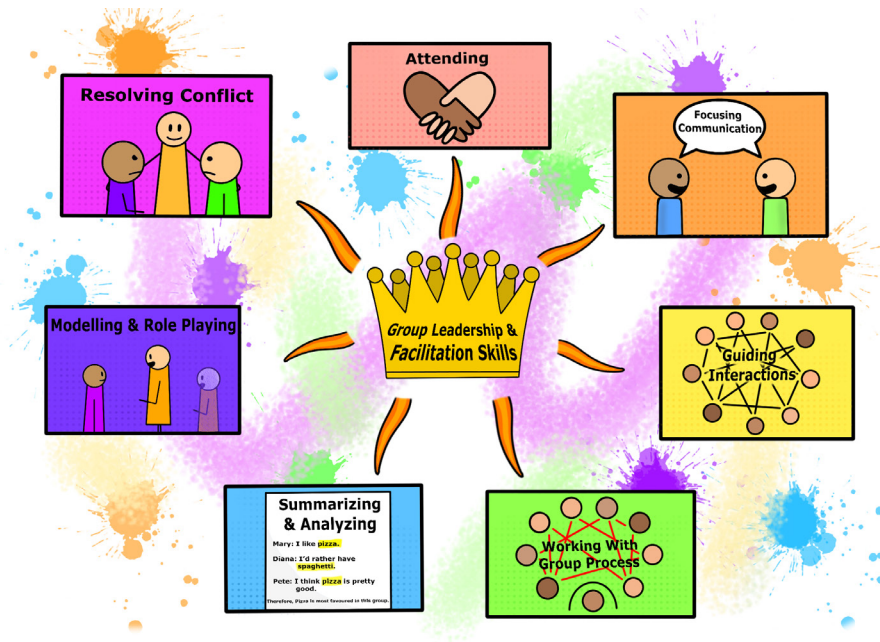
Figure 4.1 Group Leadership and Facilitation Skills

Diagram by Alex Brain

do this by attending to people—for instance, making eye contact (if it is culturally appropriate) and saying things to show that you respect them and empathize with their experiences. Most people are nervous coming to a group for the first time. You can reduce their anxiety by welcoming them and acknowledging that these feelings are normal. For instance, you could say, “If you’re feeling nervous, you’re not alone; most people are nervous at the beginning of the group.” If you are in the process of setting up while members are arriving, you can involve people in the setup if appropriate. For example, you could say, “Mary, could you help me put out paint and paper for everyone?” If you notice a common theme emerging in separate conversations between group members before the group session begins, you could point this out to help relationships form: “Paul, did you know that you and Mark attended the same school?” You already have attending skills. Now, you will get to practise them by giving your attention to each group member and by focusing on the group as a whole.

In our experience, many social work students tend to be introverted, which means that they might not enjoy engaging in small talk or might not consider articulating their thoughts out loud. Other students often feel shy or anxious about facilitating a group. If this describes you, we encourage you to pretend to act like an extrovert or to draw on the ability you have to be extroverted. This means you might need to consciously make small talk with participants as people settle in. Introduce yourself. Ask questions about the members. Be conscious about establishing a welcoming, warm, and inclusive space.

Focusing Group Communication

As the group discussion progresses, your role is to help the group maintain a focused discussion so that it is beneficial to them. You can prompt them to explore an issue by asking questions and clarifying. For example, you can ask, “Pete, can you tell us more about how you felt this morning when you had a conflict at work?” or “Mary, it sounds like you’re feeling sad about not being able to get together with friends right now—is that right?” Helping group members share their experiences can normalize their feelings, which is incredibly important for people who feel alone and isolated in their challenges. For instance, you could say, “It sounds like many of you have experienced feeling socially isolated at school. Let’s talk more about how this feels and what you think we can do about that.”

As the facilitator, you will want to ensure that all group members who want to share get the opportunity to do so. Sometimes members are excited to be in the group and they might have many issues they want to share and discuss. We have been involved with groups where youths are so excited to be together that they could easily spend the whole group session chatting and getting caught up on news unrelated to the purpose of the group. We have had to direct the youths to focus on the group content and work. If the conversation meanders from one topic to the next and is unfocused, the work of the group might be left undone. This is not to say that the formation of peer relationships is unimportant. In fact, for many marginalized youths and adults, making friends and meeting new peers is one of their favourite things about coming to a group and engaging in group work. Therefore, be cognizant of making time for casual conversation while staying focused on the group’s purpose.

Sometimes the issue is achieving a balance between the aims of the group and the desires of the members for unrelated discussions and interactions. As a facilitator, you have to constantly make judgements about when to follow the group down a tangent while you just sit back and listen, and when those tangents might not be helpful to the group work and discussion and need to be interrupted. You do not want to be so focused on content and getting through an agenda that you miss important processes and discussions, and thus lose the attention of the group members because you are not attending to their needs (this is an example of a task-focused leader, which we discuss later in this chapter). Think of your job as helping to focus communication but not control it. Also, think about how your leadership style might be influencing your tendency to keep to an agenda versus allowing the group to chart its own course. Neither extreme is helpful nor consistent with a strengths-based approach. As Malekoff (2004) explained, we want to decentralize our authority and turn control over to the group members. Indeed, we have often found that group members can guide discussions, ask questions, and summarize other group members’ thoughts. It can be empowering for a group to work collaboratively with co-facilitators to achieve group and individual goals.

Guiding Group Interactions

Similar to helping the group focus their communication, we purposefully guide group interactions to achieve an aim—for example, asking a group member to speak directly to another group member so that you can observe communication patterns and styles. You might also want to guide interactions so that they help to build group cohesion and belonging. For example, in some groups, a few members might form a subgroup, which works against group cohesion. To tackle this dynamic, we have asked

group participants to sit in predetermined places in order to promote communication and interactions between more of the participants. Have you ever noticed how in a class people often sit in the same place every time? You might have experienced a similar request by one of your professors who was trying to promote interaction beyond a small number of classmates. Your professor was not being difficult; they were merely trying to achieve the improved communication, sharing, and relationship building that leads to better group cohesion and support.

As a group progresses, you might notice an emerging issue and then decide to address that issue to improve or resolve it. For example, a group of participants might be expressing many negative self-judgements. You could raise this observation with the group and implement activities and discussion to address their poor self-esteem. Using an activity where members note one another's positive characteristics can be a helpful activity to begin challenging a person's negative self-assessment. Once, when I (Diana) was observing a group, I noticed that a 10-year-old boy was struggling to pay attention and participate with the other boys in activities. I also noticed that the other participants were becoming frustrated with this boy's behaviour. In order to change this group process, I talked to the boy briefly outside of the group, normalizing his feelings and teaching him a brief tai chi movement meant to help him feel calmer, focused, and in control. I then encouraged him to go back to the group and teach the other members this movement, thereby putting him in a leadership role and challenging the perception that he had to leave because he was a problem (a strengths-based approach to dealing with challenging behaviours). Being able to effectively guide interactions often depends on your ability to notice group processes, including patterns of communication and behaviours of group members, and we discuss this next.



Social group work students practising their facilitation skills.

Photo by Diana Coholic

Working With Group Processes

As facilitators, you will have to attend to both content and group processes. Group content is easier to understand and notice because this consists of the material that you are delivering and what people are actually saying and doing. Processes are the patterns of behaviour in the group. Process can be experienced and felt. Sometimes it is hard to discern a group process because it is not overt and cannot necessarily be seen or heard; instead, it is felt (Lindsay & Orton, 2008). For example, we hope that you have had the experience of being a part of a course or group where you felt safe, welcome, and free to express yourself without fear of reprisal or consequence. You felt trust in the instructor and your peers. On the other hand, you have probably also had the experience of feeling disconnected or disengaged in a course or group. Sometimes students or even instructors will make judgemental comments about other students or issues. If this is not addressed, the group process in that course can become uncomfortable and tense; people stop engaging because they do not want to risk being put on the spot or put down.

Whenever we are working with more than one person, there is a process unfolding that requires consideration. This is one reason why continually developing your reflexivity and reflective practice is important—it allows you to recognize processes and also contribute to constructing good group processes. In a group, the reason we discuss and construct group rules or a code of conduct in the first session is to help establish and promote productive group processes. We want to help participants listen to one another, help each other whenever possible (mutual aid), and respect confidentiality and diversity. However, these processes need your conscious attention and guidance. Encouraging group participants to think about group processes from the beginning helps to set guidelines and agreements about listening, respecting, and supporting others so that you can consciously build these processes into the group. Group members thus take ownership of their group, and contemplate what type of group they want to be a part of and are going to help create. When the group process goes awry, the group rules provide a mechanism to refer back to the agreements made in the beginning, reminding participants what kind of group they wanted to be a part of and prompting discussions about how to get back on track.

A common challenge in group processes occurs when some members dominate the discussion, while other members avoid speaking up. If you notice this process occurring, you can take steps to help rebalance group members' contributions. For instance, you could go around the group and ask each person to contribute. You could use a timer to limit how long each person gets to speak, which can be done in a supportive and strengths-based manner. For example, as a facilitator, you can provide a message that everyone's contributions are important and that you would like to hear from everyone: "Sue, what you're saying is important but it's also important to hear what others think, so let's ask Lisa what she thinks. And if we have time, we'll come back to you again." A pre-group assessment could also be useful for identifying group members who might potentially have trouble listening to others, being comfortable and accepting of diversity, and demonstrating empathy. Sometimes people are not ready to participate in, and be a part of, a diverse group. You can also find creative ways to encourage sharing such as by decorating a talking stick, rock, or other object together as a group. The item could then be passed around from member to member so that each person has time to share.



A kindness rock

Photo from the collection of Diana Coholic

If appropriate, we can also have the group overtly discuss their group process and ask for their input to improve it. By doing this, we are drawing on the strengths of the group to address their own group processes. Recently, I (Diana) taught a group work class whose participants were initially very quiet. Few of the students would speak up in front of the group to answer questions or make comments. This made the class feel strained and not as enjoyable as it could have been. After we discussed the group process as a whole, I learned that the students felt anxious about sharing, were shy, or felt challenged by the new experience of being in a small class and were still adjusting to it. (As you might have experienced yourself, it is harder to hide in a small class and easier to avoid participating in a large class, where you might never be called on to share.) However, discussing the process did little to change it. The process began to change only when the students were asked to sit in a circle instead of at smaller tables and then began to pass around a kindness rock (a rock with a kind message painted on it), each taking a turn to contribute when they were holding the rock. Physically having this group sit in a circle made a big difference to the overall group process when it came to encouraging all group members to contribute to the class discussions.

Another way to change the group dynamic is by making a group process explicit or by clarifying what you believe is going on. We have witnessed groups where, in a specific session, the process felt difficult or challenging; maybe there was too much complaining or a lack of enthusiasm. By pointing this out to the group and asking about it, group members feel understood and validated, which can then change the dynamic. For example, you can say, “Everyone seems really tired and stressed today. Is that your experience?” In these kinds of moments, you might have to be prepared to negotiate a different agenda with the group or spend some time processing their feelings and thoughts.

A memorable example of this dynamic occurred when I (Diana) was scheduled to facilitate a group the day of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. That evening, I was supposed to be teaching my first class on crisis intervention. Given the tragic events that had occurred, I decided to focus the class time on discussing the students’ feelings and thoughts about the attacks. Proceeding with teaching the planned content would not have been effective, as we were all experiencing a wide range of heightened emotions. It was more important in that moment to validate and process our thoughts and feelings about the tragedy.

Summarizing and Analyzing Information

Corey (2012) explains that summarizing—the ability to pull together the important elements of a group interaction or part of a session—is especially important when transitioning between topics and at the end of a session so that participants can reflect on what they learned (p. 24). Summarizing the important parts of a group discussion can also help people problem solve. Analysis skills include pointing out patterns and identifying missing pieces or gaps in information (Toseland & Rivas, 2001). From an anti-oppressive perspective, you might want to point out how participants’ reported challenges are due to systemic problems.

For a contemporary example, consider the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the residents and families of underserved for-profit long-term care (LTC) homes. At the time of publication, the majority of deaths from COVID-19 in Ontario have been among the elderly residents of LTC homes. Nash (2021) reported on the many systemic issues influencing the high rates of COVID-19 in LTC homes.

For instance, personal support workers often work at multiple LTC homes because of low wages and the part-time nature of their positions. As health care reporter and columnist André Picard (2020) pointed out at the beginning of the pandemic, many LTC homes are chronically understaffed and depend on these part-time workers, who at the time lacked proper personal protective equipment such as masks. It is therefore glaringly obvious that the residents of these homes were victims of ageism and poorly funded services and supports. As a society and within our communities, we must demand better care and respect for older adults.

Modelling and Role Playing

The members of a group can learn skills from watching the facilitator's behaviour. If you take appropriate risks in sharing and being honest, compassionate, and empathic, members will witness respectful behaviour and actions. For example, in group work with youth, a facilitator will sometimes need to enforce rules in order to maintain safe and respectful behaviour between group members. For some youth, this might be the first time they are witnessing an adult in a position of authority enforcing a rule in a firm but respectful and empathic manner. You could also model effective ways to communicate with someone, especially in the way you speak with your co-facilitator. Because social group work entails many group members, role playing is accessible and can assist members to practise a new communication strategy or technique.

Toseland and Rivas (2001) provide the example of a group for couples wherein one member of the couple takes the other's role in an argument. Doing so can help them understand each other's viewpoints and behaviours. Another example of modelling an effective relationship occurs between female and male co-facilitators; these interactions are especially relevant in groups for men who have been abusive in spousal and intimate relationships. It is especially important that men who hold sexist and misogynistic viewpoints see what a relationship based on equality looks like—that is, the co-facilitators share power, listen to and support each other, seek out each other's viewpoints, and so forth. This is one of the rationales for having female and male co-facilitators in groups for men who are abusive.

Confronting and Resolving Conflicts

As group facilitators, we are often most concerned with the conflict that occurs between group members, probably because we know the harm that can be caused when people are unkind to each other. As a student learning social group work, you probably feel (or have felt) overwhelmed at the prospect of handling conflict. Know that with practice and experience, you will feel more confident and effective in addressing and confronting challenges. This is where working with a more experienced co-facilitator can be invaluable. Your co-facilitator can model effective techniques and encourage and support you as you take risks to learn what works well and what does not. Try not to let the fear of making a mistake prevent you from trying different strategies; we have all learned a lot from the mistakes we have made when practising group facilitation. It is okay to admit that you do not know something or are not sure about how to handle something. Good supervision and debriefing will help you gain knowledge and practise your skills, as will continuing to read and learn about social group work.

Conflicts occur in every type of group. These include disagreements and tensions that develop between group members. In my (Diana's) experience with group work with youth, one of our biggest challenges occurs when a young person decides that

they do not like another group member. When participants have challenges with emotion regulation and externalizing behaviours, conflict can quickly arise and even feel out of control. While there are many things a facilitator can do to address this situation, sometimes no matter what we do, the tension between people will not be resolved and can affect the group process. We have to accept the reality that not every group is going to be the same, with some being more cohesive and enjoyable than others. However, even in situations when tension arises, participants can still learn and develop and derive benefits from the overall experience.

We are strong proponents of helping the group discuss, strategize, and problem solve their conflicts. Oftentimes, a member might not be happy about another member's behaviour, or an interaction might occur that is problematic. We encourage you to conceptualize and think about the group as whole entity instead of focusing on an individual member. Therefore, if Sammy is having trouble listening to others, maybe the group can work together to help improve communication skills. You could even implement a basic behavioural modification activity where the group has to work together to earn points that they can exchange for a special treat. If they are not adhering to the agreed-upon plan, they lose points. Using this approach, you are helping the group develop responsibility for each other, and hopefully, mutual aid.

We encourage you not to be controlling with group members' actions, especially when working with youth who may not have the skills to sit quietly and listen to instructions. You do not have to respond to every behaviour, particularly when it is not disruptive to the overall group process. For example, if a youth decides not to participate in an activity, this could be their way of regulating their feelings and staying grounded. Where you do have to intervene is when aggressive behaviour is being displayed or derogatory comments are being made, as it is your responsibility to ensure the safety of all group members. As the leader of the group, you may have to enforce rules or guidelines for the safety and well-being of all group members. We discuss these issues more in Chapters 5 and 6 when we address group member roles and the use of power.

Co-facilitation Issues and Skills

When co-facilitating a group, we bring two styles of leadership together. Some facilitators tend to be more autocratic, focusing on the completion of tasks and direction. Others tend to be more democratic, focusing on team building and involving all members of the group in decisions. Finally, some of us are more laissez-faire, a leadership style in which we might take a back seat and let the group direct itself (Bjorkquist, 2005). We all have the ability to demonstrate all three styles even though we might tend toward one in particular. Indeed, sometimes you need all three approaches in a group.

Sometimes new group workers are not sure what their style is because of a lack of experience and reflection on this subject. However, it is important to contemplate your own approach and values, and determine how these align with an anti-oppressive stance. Also, you will need to contemplate how your leadership style fits with the style of a co-facilitator because some styles are complementary, while others can create challenges. For example, if both co-facilitators tend toward autocratic styles, the group might be too task focused with not enough attention given to group processes. On the other hand, if both co-facilitators take a laissez-faire approach, the group might not accomplish enough to benefit the participants.

The advantages of co-facilitating a group are numerous. They include sharing responsibilities for initially developing the group, facilitating the sessions, and evaluating the group when it ends. Having a co-facilitator also brings another viewpoint and therefore can assist you with understanding and implementing the skills and processes we discussed earlier. Two facilitators might be able to attend to the group members' needs more effectively, and your strengths might complement the limitations of your co-facilitator, and vice versa. Practically speaking, if you are ill, tired, or having a bad day, your co-facilitator can pick up the slack in that moment.

Table 4.1 The Advantages of Co-facilitating a Group

Sharing responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing and planning the group • Sharing knowledge and resources • Facilitating sessions • Evaluating the group when it ends
Providing alternative viewpoints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting in understanding group content and processes • Implementing skills, including attending, focusing group communication, guiding interactions, working with group processes, summarizing and analyzing, modelling and role playing, and resolving conflict
Complementing each other's strengths and supporting limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending to group members' needs more effectively • If leadership styles differ, using this to your advantage, as different styles and approaches can be complementary

Lindsay and Orton (2008) have pointed out that group members also benefit from co-facilitation. These benefits include experiencing the concern and interest of two authority figures; having more than one facilitator to identify with; witnessing effective social and interpersonal skills in a working relationship; and seeing an improved balance in terms of gender, ethnicity, and other social locations and characteristics.

Ideally, co-facilitators should be clear and in agreement about the purpose of the group. They should be prepared to discuss the tensions and conflicts in the group experience, and be willing to invite differences in style and approach as long as there is agreement about group purpose (Benson, 2010). Challenges arise when co-facilitators do not adequately prepare and plan, which can lead to mismatching ideas about tasks and roles. We can also encounter challenges when we have irreconcilable differences in theoretical orientation; have differences of opinion regarding techniques or required skills; come from competing agencies or are in competition; or are split off by the group members (Lindsay & Orton, 2008). These challenges in co-facilitation are some of the reasons why it is so important to prepare and debrief when you are doing group work. If you prepare and problem solve together, bring an open mind and genuine interest in working together, and demonstrate support for each other, it is not likely that you are going to encounter serious conflicts with your co-facilitator.

In preparing for a session, you can discuss an agenda and who is going to be responsible for which tasks. You can discuss who will be focused on delivering content and who will be responsible for monitoring group processes and when. For example, if your co-facilitator is teaching content, you could be watching the group process and intervening if members are not paying attention or are engaging in some distracting behaviours. During debriefing, you could discuss the positive moments of the group and the challenging experiences. You could discuss each other's approaches

Attending to challenging group processes and behaviours can change these dynamics and help develop mutual aid and group cohesion.

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to addressing a challenge and problem solve for the next session if the issue requires further attention.

I (Diana) have been involved in supporting the facilitation of HAP groups within an organization that adhered to a medical model, which is usually at odds with social work's anti-oppressive approach. In one situation, the co-facilitators were concerned, as medical professionals were walking into the group room uninvited and unexpectedly to observe the group process. The concern was that this disrupted the group work and created an unsafe environment. Indeed, the group members would stop participating and sharing during these moments. While we understood the curiosity of other professionals, these interruptions negatively interfered in the group work. Thus, during debriefing, I normalized and supported the co-facilitators' opinions, and we problem-solved how to deal with this situation. In this instance, I had to seek the intervention of an allied helping professional within the organization who could address and resolve the matter. Keep this example in mind when you are reading Chapter 6, where we further discuss working within interdisciplinary teams.



Active Learning Exercise

Good Group Facilitation

In a small group, with a partner, or individually, discuss/contemplate the following questions about group facilitation:

1. What does good group facilitation look like?
2. What does it feel like when you are on the receiving end of good group facilitation?
3. What sort of skills and training do you need to be a competent group facilitator?

In the following case example, a Master of Social Work student, Kaitlenn Shaw, shares her experiences co-facilitating and leading HAP groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. We encourage you to note the application of the skills discussed in this chapter.

CASE EXAMPLE

Group Work With LGBTQ Youth

Written by
Kaitlinn Shaw

Part of the rationale for this group was that these youth live in an underserved community where they tend to be socially isolated and have few supports.

The mental health disparities faced by LGBTQ youth in Canada are considerable, with studies showing that this population experiences elevated levels of depression and suicidality (Almeida et. al., 2009; Marshal et. al, 2011). Given the isolated and underserved northeastern context in which the youth we work with are located, I wanted to create a group that addressed LGBTQ participants' mental health risks.

These are examples of attending skills.

The LGBTQ groups were some of the most effective groups I have facilitated in my three years of working with HAP. The youth were engaged, fun, and inspiring. I learned through self-reflection and clinical supervision how to recognize and apply leadership skills too. For example, we had to create a space where LGBTQ youth felt accepted and safe enough to participate in the group process authentically. We purposefully set this context by using inclusive and nongendered language; being conscious of language when communicating with parents who may not know of their child's preferred name; reassuring group members that participation was voluntary; being vulnerable in our own social identities by disclosing our pronouns and sexualities; and clearly communicating the limits of confidentiality while also recognizing and validating that participants could face the danger of discrimination, violence, and other serious harms if their identities were disclosed and their privacy compromised outside of the group.

A key skill that we as facilitators demonstrated in this group was focusing group communications. In a group where some participants experienced social belonging and connection for the first time, it was common for the conversation to easily stray from the agenda to the unique interests or experiences they shared. It was also not unusual for the group to divide into smaller groups of conversation as they got off-topic. It took skill and intentional effort to strike a balance between encouraging the conversation to flow naturally—to allow for group cohesion and mutual aid to develop—and knowing how to steer the conversation to relate it to the concepts being taught in the session and include everyone.

The youth were excited to be together in a safe and comfortable place. Using their conversations, the facilitators focused and guided the discussions so that all group members could be involved and benefit from the discussions and learn about the concepts.

An example of how I demonstrated this skill was in a conversation between two participants talking about their experiences being teased by the same youth in the community. One of the youths was explaining how even though he was the victim, he would often be the only one who ended up in trouble because he would punch the youth who was teasing him and land himself in the principal's office. I saw this as an opportunity to ask the whole group whether they had ever experienced a time where they got so angry so quickly that they reacted without thinking—a question I related to the concept of mindfulness and making choices about our feelings. The majority of the group members were able to relate to this example and explain a circumstance where this had occurred in their lives.

Another key facilitation skill I learned was making group processes explicit. I initially found this skill difficult to use, as it felt uncomfortable to call out behaviour, especially if it was directed toward me. But I became more confident the more I practised and witnessed its effectiveness in the group. I made

a group process explicit when a participant started continually displaying aggressive behaviour toward me in each session. At one point, the participant pulled my chair out from under me as I went to sit down, and I fell on the floor. This behaviour was noticeably different from their behaviour in the first couple of sessions. They also began to say things such as, “So are you going to kick me out of the group yet?” or “Oh, don’t worry, I’ll call the group home for you to come to get me. I’m used to it.”

Upon hearing these statements, I was able to connect my knowledge of attachment theory to this youth’s behaviour. It made sense to me that, based on prior experiences of rejection, this youth might fear abandonment from new people that they like (such as me and the other group members). I made this process explicit by saying, “I have noticed your behaviour toward me has gotten more aggressive over the last few weeks. Are you testing me to see if I’ll kick you out of the group? Because I am not going to do that. I want you here because I think we have a lot to learn from each other, but I need respect in the same way that I model respect for you and the rest of the group members.” I conveyed this information using attending skills such as turning my body toward the youth and making eye contact. After saying this, the youth was quiet and went to the bathroom. When they came back, I noticed they had been crying. It seemed as though they had heard and understood me, and it meant something to them.

This is a good example of how addressing a challenging process worked—it stopped the unhelpful behaviours and engaged the youth in the group work. Understanding attachment theory and its application to this youth’s behaviours, applying a strengths-based approach, and using positive attending skills helped to address the group process effectively.

From that session onward, the participant never again displayed aggressive behaviour. Instead, they were engaged, honest, open, respectful, and one of the most compassionate youths I have worked with. They made impressive progress throughout the rest of the program, and in the end thanked me for being one of the only people in their lives who hadn’t given up on them.

In all my group facilitation experience, I learned that group work is something that requires skill, group dynamics can sometimes be challenging, co-facilitation is sometimes difficult to navigate, and there are days when you might not feel like you have the capacity to lead. But these challenges do not have to be overwhelming. I have been inspired by the power of group work and mutual aid.

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In Kaitlenn’s case example, the LGTBQ HAP group was formed to provide a safe space in our community for youth to come together to make connections and share experiences, as well as to build their resilience. Bringing LGTBQ youth together in one group gave them an opportunity to focus on shared issues, experiences, and challenges, which fostered normalization, group cohesion and belonging, and mutual aid. In this dedicated space, the youth responded positively and were deeply engaged with the group program and each other. It was particularly important to demonstrate good

attending skills to create this positive space. The case example also shows the importance of effectively applying theories and knowledge, such as attachment theory, to understand participants' behaviours and the processes occurring in the group.

Key Takeaways

- It is normal for new group facilitators to feel anxious about leading a group. Keep in mind that you have social work skills such as attending behaviours to build on. Through reading and practice, your understanding and skills will develop and improve. We often ask the people we work with to take risks and challenges. Thus, it makes sense that we model this motivation to learn.
- Ideally, your group leadership skills and facilitation styles are grounded in anti-oppressive and strengths-based values and approaches. Bring an open mind to learning, and foster positive relationships with your co-facilitator(s). We all make mistakes when learning social group work, so remember to be compassionate with yourself and understand that this is part of the learning process for everyone.
- There are many skills a group facilitator employs that build on social work capacities and values. When used appropriately, these skills will help to establish a respectful and productive environment within which group members can learn and practise new skills.
- People have different facilitation and leadership styles, something to consider when you and your co-facilitator work together to lead a group.
- Co-facilitation brings many benefits to social group work, including support and opportunities to learn about ourselves through analysis of our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What skills and abilities will you bring to social group work?
2. What skills and abilities do you need to learn?
3. What is your leadership style?
4. Discuss some strengths and challenges corresponding to your leadership style and how you work with others.
5. Identify some benefits and challenges of working with a co-facilitator.
6. Discuss an example of when you helped someone develop a more holistic and systemic analysis of an issue.
7. What group facilitation skill do you think will be/is most challenging for you to learn and implement?

Resources

Social Work Group Therapy: Co-Facilitating a Girls Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcALmc1yqEE>

Concepts for Effective Facilitation of Open Groups

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01609513.2011.558822>

Facilitation and Group Work Skills

<https://www.hma.co.nz/resources/facilitation-and-group-work-skills/>

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