

PEER SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATOR GUIDE



2020

LEADING ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

World Bank Group and IMF staff and family members are supporting one another in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the establishment throughout the organization of various online peer-led support groups, and the anticipated establishment of still more such groups, this guide was developed to outline concrete guidance to assist with the establishment and function of such groups. Such groups provide participants with a space to express their feelings and share their experiences with others who are experiencing many of the same situations. Additionally, we provide a resource section to assist group leaders with providing relevant information to participants who may have concerns that cannot be addressed via a peer support group.

WHO COULD BENEFIT FROM USING THIS GUIDE

This guide was developed to provide guidance and best practice recommendations to individuals who may be leading, or interested in leading, online peer support groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS GUIDE

This guide has been organized into a user-friendly format that is easy to read and includes specific guidance on:

- Planning a Peer Support Group;
- Running a Peer Support Group;
- Facilitator Functions;
- Facilitator Skills;
- Wellness Tools for Facilitators;
- Resources;
- References; and
- Appendices

Where possible, examples have been included in each of the sections to provide further clarity.

PLANNING THE GROUP

- **Provide a description of the type of online support group you will be offering.** Questions to ask yourself include:
 - What benefit will individuals derive from being in the group?
 - For how long will this group run?
 - What topics may be “in (and out of) bounds?”
- **Use a secure platform.** It is highly recommended that Webex be used as the platform to deliver the online support group. The use of other internet-based platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, or Facetime is not recommended because they may not be sufficiently electronically secure or otherwise ensure confidentiality.
- **Provide clear instructions on how to connect to the Webex group.** Include contact information for the technical support team in case of connection difficulties. Give people the option of connecting by audio or video. In order to maintain confidentiality, advise video participants in advance that unless they wish their names to appear they should log in anonymously.
- **Ideally, group size should be no more than 10-12 members.** However, you may wish to consider asking a co-facilitator to help manage a significantly larger group size.

SAMPLE EMAIL INVITATION:

Dear Peer Support Group Participant,

*Many of us have discussed the benefit of organizing an online peer support group. I have reviewed the facilitator’s guide that HSD has made available and invite you to join our group. I have invited members of **[describe who will participate]** to join us. Our first meeting will be on **[day/date]**; the exact time, and WebEx information, are below.*

As a group we will endeavor to help and support one another during this difficult time. We will start each meeting with a brief check-in and introductions, and I will close it with a brief wrap-up at the end. What this group is not is any type of therapy – we are here to support one another, and if anyone feels that they need or want support of a different type or different intensity, they are encouraged to contact the [HSD Counseling Unit](#).

Meeting Date & Time: XXXXX

Webex Info: XXXXXX

If you have any questions at all, feel free to email me.

Regards,

RUNNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

1. Consider beginning with a Grounding Activity (examples listed in Appendix)
2. Starting the Meeting: The Welcome

Facilitators may want to start the meeting by welcoming the members and introducing themselves. This is also a good time to inform the members of what the facilitator's role is and is not. It's important to establish that this is not a therapy group. Facilitators should explain the purpose of the group, start and end times for the group, and any other "housekeeping" announcements may also be included in the welcome portion. When beginning a group, create an opportunity for everybody to introduce themselves and begin the process of building social connections with the rest of the group.

Example Language to Consider: *Thank you for your willingness to participate in this support group. The purpose of this group is to provide a safe space for us to gather and discuss our thoughts and feelings, as well as offer support during these challenging times. We will meet (frequency – weekly perhaps?) and it is important to keep in mind that we are all equals here, supporting one another.*

Here's what you can expect today:

- *We will spend about 45 minutes in our discussion*
- *We will do a check in; and review confidentiality, group guidelines, and ground rules*
- *We will focus on finding common ground, sharing our experiences and how we are finding ways to cope with the current situation. We will share important resources and guidance on where to direct people with specific questions (e.g., HSD, HR, mental health, domestic abuse; etc.).*

3. Confidentiality and its Limitations

Facilitators should explain the meaning of confidentiality within a group setting and discuss what will happen if confidentiality is breached.

Example Language to Consider: *Confidentiality is an important element of this support group. It is a critical and absolute rule that everything that is said in this room – "virtual" as it is - remain only amongst us. It is important for everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues arise. However, if anyone has any urgent concerns about another participant's safety they should contact either the WBG SOC or the IMF GSOC immediately.*

4. Establish/Review Group Guidelines

Every support group must have guidelines for individual and group expectations. It is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that everyone in the group understands and adheres to them. Guidelines generally include and address group etiquette and boundaries (refer to appendices for more detail). The guidelines need to be reiterated at every meeting even if there are no new members present.

Example Language to Consider: *It's good to all be on the same page especially when it comes to comfort in the group. We all need to agree to general housekeeping and self-care; the need for confidentiality; minimizing distractions (turning cell phones to vibrate and turning off "push" alerts, for example); and treating others with unconditional positive regard and respect for diversity. We want everyone to have an opportunity to speak if they wish to do so.*

5. Guiding the Flow of the Conversation

Facilitator should guide the conversation and makes sure it stays focused. The discussion should have a natural, conversational flow. Keep these following tips in mind to maximize the group experience.

- Invite participants to share and respond to other members
- Encourage participants to listen to one another
- Emphasize to participants how helpful it is to offer support to one another
- Encourage members to talk about themselves but only to the extent they feel comfortable
- Be knowledgeable and ready to share resources and where to direct people in cases where questions arise beyond the scope of the group

6. Managing Disruptive Members:

Sometimes, participants may dominate a group or raise issues in a manner that is disruptive to the overall group. It is important for facilitators to address behavior that is disruptive and counterproductive to the support group. Initially, facilitators may want to simply pose the correction to the entire group without singling out a specific participant. Referring to the group's pre-established can be helpful. However, if a participant's disruptive behavior continues, the facilitator may need to directly address the issue in the group setting. Below are a few common scenarios that may occur, and some language which may help you manage those situations.

- a) A member monopolizes the discussion or frequently interrupts others. Your response might be to give the floor back to the original speaker. (e.g. "I'd like to go back to Yasmina for a minute. I don't think she was finished talking. We want everyone to have equal opportunity to share.")

- b) A member broaches inappropriate subjects or ones that may be offensive in nature. An effective response might be to redirect the discussion (e.g. “It doesn’t seem like this an appropriate discussion for this group, so we are going to move on.”)
- c) A member continuously digresses to irrelevant topics. Your response would be to redirect the focus to the purpose of the meeting. (e.g. “How does that relate to what we’ve been talking about today?”)

Facilitators must be able to determine if disruptions can effectively be addressed to the entire group or if speaking to the member in private outside of the meeting is better. Individuals who become argumentative or unresponsive to feedback and correction may need to be excused from the group. This may also be an opportunity to confidentially refer such a person to the HSD Counseling unit.

7. Handling Difficult Situations:

Being able to recognize a difficult or crisis situation is critical and may require immediate support, regardless of what was planned for the group. (e.g. a member in distress, disclosure of abuse, medical concerns, etc). Timely assistance by facilitators to connect members to resources offered by the IMF/World Bank can prevent issues from progressing further and will build stronger trust within the group. A quick reference list of key resources to refer/connect members to has been provided on the Resource section.

8. Closing the Meeting

Facilitators also bring closure to the meetings. Suggestions for ending a meeting include:

Providing a 10-15-minute notification before the discussion is scheduled to end.

Announcing the date and time of the next meeting.

Concluding the meeting by expressing appreciation to the group for their presence and participation.

Facilitators should also encourage members to support one another in between meetings and reach out when needed.

Example Language to Consider: *We are close to the time we need to end and we would like to thank you for sharing your ideas and experiences with us. We have talked about some important elements of your lives and this may bring up feelings that you may not have thought about in some time. So, I’d like to check in to see how you are feeling? Provide support afterwards, if needed.*

9. The Role of the Facilitator

- Peer facilitators are responsible for guiding group members in a healthy and purposeful discussion that will help them address the issues for which the group is designed; currently, this is most likely the stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. What makes this role unique is that Peer Facilitators are also experiencing the issues being addressed by the group. They are open about their experiences and use them to connect with group members on a personal level. It's important to remember that such groups are not the same as "group therapy." In peer support groups all members are equals. Key additional roles of the facilitator are as follows:
- Foster communication within the group and model effective interaction for members.
- Offer validation of group members' feelings (e.g. "It makes sense that you might be worried about that.")
- Create a safe, welcoming environment for members to feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences and learning from one another
- Share appropriate and relevant resource information with group members.
- Stimulate discussions designed to support and encourage progress for the group as a whole and for each member as an individual.
- Observe the group atmosphere, help to move things along, clarify ideas, and ensure that everyone feels included.
- Model appropriate etiquette (e.g., addressing members by their names)

10. Facilitator Skills

Members often look to the facilitators as leaders, because it takes a skill set to lead effective groups. In addition to leadership skills, there are various skills that must be present in order to be an effective facilitator. These skills can be refined over time and be adapted to fit the facilitator's own style and personality. Key additional facilitator skills are as follows:

- **Clear and effective communication** (using open-ended questions). Group members should talk more than the facilitator.
- **Maintenance of appropriate boundaries** (e.g., be clear about your role and its limits). Intervene in difficult situations and redirect wherever and whenever possible.
- **Assertive communication** in ways that are clear and directive. For example, "I would like to be able to finish sharing my perspective."
- **Use of strength-based language**, such as "I" statements.

11. Wellness Tools for Facilitators

- Leading a peer support group can be challenging at times so be kind to yourself. Make sure you do something nice for yourself and practice good self-care.

- Connect with other peer leaders to share experiences and get support.
- Give yourself a compassion break. For example, when you notice that you're under stress, see if you can find the stress in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Identify any stress as it arises in your body. Practice self-reflection. This practice will help you build upon your strengths and progress in areas you may find challenging.
- Participate in the online "Power of Relaxation" class. Classes are being offered starting Tuesday March 24, 2020 at 12 p.m. Washington, DC time. The Power of Relaxation class is for all WBG and IMF staff and spouses who are interested in pursuing their relaxation and meditation practice while working from home. Click [here](#) for a direct link to the class.
- Practice Self Care. Engage in positive practices that are soothing to your body, mind and soul.

RESOURCES

WHEN AND WHERE TO REFER

Members may raise questions or concerns that need to be redirected to other resources. Please use this guide to redirect participants to the following resources and contact information.

- Those with medical questions and other questions related to the coronavirus COVID 19 are can contact travelhealth@worldbank.org.
 - Bank Group staff and dependents can also call the COVID 24 helpline at +1-202-458-8300
 - IMF staff and dependents can call its 24/7 toll-free COVID-19 Hotline at +1-877-861-9090
- For urgent matters:
 - Bank Group staff and dependents should contact the Security Operations Center at +1-202-458-8888
 - Fund staff and dependents should contact the Global Security Operations Center (GSOC) at +1 (202) 623-9911
 - In case of a life-threatening emergency, contact the emergency services appropriate to the local country (e.g., "911" in the United States)
- General medical questions (e.g., diseases, injuries, or chronic medical conditions), are to be redirected to travelhealth@worldbank.org
Bank and Fund staff who wish to make an appointment with a Counseling Unit counselor can either call +1-202-458-4457 or email hsdcounseling@worldbankgroup.org. Staff who need to speak with a counselor right away can call the 24/7 Psychological Counseling Helpline at +1-202-458-5600.
- Questions and concerns about domestic abuse should be directed to the Bank/Fund Domestic Abuse Prevention Program, which can be reached at +1-202-458-5800 or daprevention@worldbankgroup.org

- Free-of-charge counseling services for Bank Group and Fund spouses, partners, and dependents above 18 years are available through the Family Consultation Service, which can be reached at +1-202-458-5550 or familyconsultationservice@wbfm.org

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APPENDICES

Grounding exercises (can help to redirect thoughts away from distressing feelings and back to the present)

1. Breathe Deeply

Slowly inhale, then exhale. If it helps, you can say or think “in” and “out” with each breath. Feel each breath filling your lungs and note how it feels to push it back out.

2. Engaging your senses 5-4-3-2-1

- Describe 5 things you see in the room
- Name 4 things you can feel
- Name 3 things you hear right now
- Name 2 things you can smell right now
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

3. Practice “Self-Kindness”

Repeat kind, compassionate phrases to yourself:

- “You’re having a rough time, but you’ll make it through.”
- “You’re strong, and you can move through this pain.”
- “You’re trying hard, and you’re doing your best.”

Effective Communication Skills

- Reflecting back words, thoughts and feelings – The facilitator reflects back the words, thoughts and feelings of the group, while subtly emphasizing their own words (e.g. “It sounds as if you’re saying you want to change the way you’ve been handling this issue.?” or “You sound like you are very disappointed.”)
- Respond with affirmations – Validate the speaker by responding with affirmations. Not only does this boost the speaker’s self-esteem, but it also helps them feel understood and stay positive. (e.g. “It seems like you handled that well.” or “It sounds like you were affectively assertive. I remember you’ve previously said that was something you found difficult.”)
- Clarification – Help the speaker clarify their thoughts and messages by reiterating what they said and asking clarifying questions using their own words. (e.g. “I think you mentioned earlier that you ‘don’t want to work in this field anymore’, now you have said that you are ‘hoping to take on more responsibilities at work’. Which most accurately reflects your current wishes?”)
- Summarizing – Every so often, facilitators should paraphrase what the speaker has said to ensure there is a clear understanding of their message. This also helps other members of the group follow along.
- Positive facial expressions – Judgmental expressions like head shaking and frowning need to be avoided. Instead, encouraging and empathetic facial expressions like smiling and looks of empathy should be given. These are positive ways of responding naturally to the group

Group Etiquette

It is imperative for everyone to understand the expectations for respect and personal responsibility. These guidelines address common courtesies.

- Listening without interrupting
- Avoiding personal or side conversations during the meeting
- Acceptance of differences (including social, cultural, linguistic differences)
- Respecting one another’s opinions
- Confidentiality (*What is said here, stays here*)
- Turning cell phone on vibrate, turn off push alerts (phone and computer)
- Muting your microphone when you are not speaking