



Facilitator Tips:

SKILL REVIEW



Occasionally it's useful to look at volunteering from the lens of "What are we doing here?" We don't mean that in an existential, life purpose way — although that's super interesting too — but more in the sense of what exactly are we trying to do when we facilitate peer support groups for children, teens, and families who are grieving?

Here's our take: we are working to create an atmosphere that feels different than what people usually encounter in daily life, especially when it comes to grief. Rather than assumptions, platitudes, advice, or forced silver linings, we strive for connection, acknowledgment, understanding, and acceptance. A lot goes into fostering this kind of environment. We pay close attention to ourselves and others. We deeply listen. We facilitate safe, supportive conversations. We also hand out snacks, pass tissues, cheer on foosball games, and remain steady in the face of difficult emotions. Easy right? Thankfully the skills of awareness, reflection, asking questions, and group facilitation provide us with the tools needed for these efforts.

While other Facilitator Tips explore these skills in more depth, we thought it would be helpful to have a general review of them in one place.

Awareness

This skill is the foundation for everything we do as facilitators. The more aware we are of ourselves and others, along with what's happening with group dynamics, the time of year, anniversaries, and even something as simple as the (literal) temperature in the room, the better equipped we are to choose what to say and do. Pre- and post-meetings are great times to cultivate your awareness. Notice what comes up for you as other volunteers and the Coordinator check-in or talk about participants. When are you the most engaged? When do you find yourself checking-

out? What topics hook your emotions? If you're comfortable, bring these realizations to the conversation. We learn so much from each other's awarenesses.

Reflection

When you reflect what participants say and do, you offer the opportunity for them to deepen their self-understanding. Pure reflection can also allow people to see themselves or their stories differently. Sometimes, hearing their words, spoken by someone else, helps people refine how they understand their experience. It's similar to the difference a mirror makes when we get dressed for the day.

Often we can't decide what we want to wear until we see our choices reflected back to us. You can reflect with words, actions, and energy. If a child is jumping on the trampoline, you can jump up and down on the floor near them. If a teen is speaking quietly and slowly, you can reflect with a similar volume and pace. Rather than repeat back every word a participant says, you can pick out one or two elements to reflect.

Participant: Wow, what an intense summer we had. The kids were at camp for almost a month and I found myself so frightened I would get a call that something bad happened to one of them.

Facilitator options: a) You were so frightened. b) The summer was intense. c) You were scared you'd get a call about something happening to one of the kids.

If reflection still feels awkward and you find yourself avoiding it, keep in mind that it is very powerful and effective. It's extremely rare for children, teens, or



Facilitator Tips:

even adults to have the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings without interference or influence from other people. Working to grow more comfortable with this skill is a worthwhile effort.

Asking Questions

When it comes to asking questions, it's good to go back to the original inquiry, "What are we doing here?" Being clear about our intention helps with crafting questions that open the door for participants, if they choose, to share more of their story. The goal is to create a safe environment where participants can learn more about what they know, think, and feel - not what we want them to know, think or feel. Questions, used in conjunction with awareness and reflection, are a great tool for achieving this goal. Here are some common question pitfalls to avoid:

- Asking a question before the person is done talking. Note: sometimes this is a useful strategy if you need to interrupt someone - but that's a whole different Tip topic.
- Asking about something that is completely different than what the person is talking about, unless you transition with some reflection.

Sometimes a question can be a reflection with a question mark on the end. Using the example above, if the participant had only said, "Wow the summer was so intense", the facilitator could respond with, "Intense?", as an open-ended way of inviting the participant to say more. There are a number of other questions that would work in this example including:

- *During those times when you were so frightened, what did you do? (What helped?)*
- *How was it for your kids to be away from you?*

If you wanted to ask a question about another topic, here's how it would sound to transition using reflection:

- *This summer was really intense. What else was different for you this summer without your partner?*
- *It was so frightening to worry you'd get a call*

about something happening to the kids. What other emotions did you notice coming up for you this summer?



In Volunteer Training we emphasize the usefulness of open-ended (What was that like for you?) over close-ended questions (Did you go to the memorial service?), but it's not always easy to come up with an open-ended one. Depending on the participant, there are times when a close-ended question can spark a lot of sharing. If you can't think of an open-ended question, go ahead and ask your close-ended one. It's still a great way to practice getting comfortable with asking questions at all!

Group Facilitation

Facilitating is a balance of attending to individuals (micro), while also ensuring the group is functioning as a whole (macro). Keeping track of time, acknowledging what's happening in the room, broadening the conversation, making connections, inviting quieter participants to share, and interrupting or containing those who talk a lot are part of the art of facilitating on the macro level. If you work with kids or teens, the Coordinator of the group does the majority of this, but there are ways to help. If you facilitate an adult group, these are vital elements in keeping the group safe and welcoming. Here are some tips:

- Keep an eye on the clock before asking participants additional questions. If it's close to the end, it's best to hold off asking something new. It's also helpful to be aware of the time when it's your turn to share so you know if you should pass or be very concise.
- When there is a new participant, ask the person next to them to start and be sure to go the opposite way. It can be overwhelming for someone



Facilitator Tips:

- new to be the first or second person to talk.
- Take a moment to acknowledge similarities and differences in group. *Half of you were excited school started and the other half are disappointed that summer is over* or *Everyone who had a mom die is sitting on this side of the room – interesting how that happened.*
- Almost anything a participant shares can be put out to the group for additional input. This is a great strategy to make it a group conversation, invite someone to talk, or contain those who take up too much of the discussion time. Using the example from earlier, you could say: *Who else struggles with worrying you'll get "that phone call?"* or *What was the summer like for other people?* or *Katrina, I'm wondering if anything you've heard tonight connects with your story?*
- If you have a participant who tends to talk a lot, try asking the person next to them to start the group and then go in the opposite direction. This limits how much time they have to share. It's also helpful to give a few reminders about how much time is left compared to how many people haven't spoken. *I'm noticing there are about 20 minutes left and five of you haven't had a chance to share, so that means we have about 4-5 minutes for each person.*

So, there is everything you need to know about facilitating! While we wish that were true, it's really just a brief review of the main skills we use in small and large group interactions. Please bring any questions, concerns, or celebrations of skill success to your pre- and post-meetings.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

©2026