

Engaging Participants with Questions



The way facilitators ask questions not only guides participants' learning, but also impacts participants' feelings of psychological safety. There are three components to consider when constructing a question with the psychological safety of your group in mind: type of question, set up the question and your response to an answer as a facilitator.

Type of Question

- **Open-ended** – This is a question that is asking for participants to share beyond a one-word answer. In the beginning of forming a group, open-ended questions can be helpful to use as a way for participants to get to know each other. When your group is first getting to know each other, it's best to keep open-ended questions relatively safe to answer. As the group gets to know each other and a sense of safety is established, facilitators can ask questions that encourage participants to go deeper with their reflections.
- **Yes/No** – Facilitators typically use a Yes/No question to check for understanding or agreement, for example after creating group agreements and checking to see if the group is comfortable with the list generated.
- **Looking for correct answer** – An example of a "looking for the correct answer" question could be, who knows what the definition of compassion resilience is? Using these types of questions do not typically contribute to participants' learning in the context of compassion resilience groups. Instead, restate the definition and then ask an open-ended question such as asking what about the definition resonates the most for them. This helps participants personalize the content rather than testing if they know the exact definition.

Engaging Participants with Questions

Setting up a Question

- **Formulate question clearly** – Having to ask the same question more than twice is a pretty good sign that something about your question is not working for the group. Perhaps the wording is confusing, the group does not know how long of a response you are looking for, or participants need an example to make the question clearer.
- **What participants can expect of a facilitator as a questioner** – To build safety in a group it is helpful for participants to know what to expect of the facilitator. For example: *I will give 15 seconds of silence to give people time to think... I'll call on participants by group...*
- **What does the facilitator expect of participants** – Giving clear expectations of the type and number of answers the facilitator is looking for helps participants formulate the answer they wish to share and avoids the problem of people going too deep or not deep enough in their responses. For example: *In a one or two-word answer... Reflect on this question so you can go deeper with your response... I'm looking for whatever pops into your head... We'll take three responses on this question.*

Responses to Answers

- **Responding with a value-neutral response, such as thank you** – When a participant shares their answer to a question, facilitators should avoid value-laden responses (that's great, excellent...). Responding in a value-laden way leaves participants with the impression that certain viewpoints are welcomed in the group while others are not.
- **Connecting participants' responses to previous content or sharing by another participant** – This can help deepen participants' learning and make participants feel more connected to each other.
- **Acknowledge that they brought a new idea to the group** – If a participant shares a response that is new to the group, acknowledging that difference in opinion can highlight it as an opportunity for other participants to consider and share diverse ideas. For example, *thank you for sharing, that's a perspective we hadn't considered yet. Does anyone else have additional thoughts on that perspective?*

