

APPENDIX G

Small-Group Discussion Tool Kit

Small-group discussions require a lot of preparatory work. Listening sessions and focus groups can both be used to reach at least 10 different groups. Each session will need to be at least one hour long and the **same seven to 10 questions** must be used with each group whether it is a listening session or focus group. The questions asked during the discussions will depend on the data needs and goals of the survey. See chart below for a comparison of listening sessions and focus groups.

	Listening Sessions	Focus Groups
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants know each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants do not know each other.
Number of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally larger number of participants than focus groups • No maximum • 10 different groups minimum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group 6-12 (8-10 ideal) • Minimum of 6 people (smaller group is a conversation) • 10 different groups minimum
Recruitment of Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-existing group e.g., volunteer fire men, social clubs, church choirs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carefully recruited groups of people who have something in common and are brought together for the purpose of the focus group. e.g., single moms, senior citizens
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 to 10 with the same ones repeated at each session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 to 10 with the same ones repeated at each session
Advantages	Since participants know each other: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good participation and attendance • Easier recruitment • Easy scheduling • High trust level among participants increases participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can recruit subjects based on their demographics • Can bring participants together based on their interest in talking about a health topic
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants may not feel comfortable talking about sensitive health issues among people they will see again. • Pre-existing group dynamics may influence the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to get good participation • Tough to schedule • Low level of trust may hamper participation

Advantages

- Offers an opportunity to get opinions and detailed information that cannot be collected in closed-ended questions.
- Participants will tell what is important to them and how they feel about a topic rather than simply responding to predetermined categories of responses.
- Small group discussions also offer the opportunity to get opinions from diverse groups.
- Moderator has the opportunity to observe interaction and discussion on a topic. Nonverbal reactions can often tell observers much about participants' opinions on a topic.

Disadvantages

- Analyzing the results requires time to transcribe the recordings or notes and give thought to the discussion. The responses to questions are often long and complex; translating this information into useful data is not easy.
- Difficult to explore multitude of topics addressed during limited time.
- Participants may feel intimidated as some individuals may be less responsive to discussing certain topics among a group of people than in a one-on-one interview.
- Multiple groups using the same seven to 10 questions must be conducted and analyzed.

Setting Up a Small-group Discussion

Publicity and site selection are important considerations to setting up a discussion. The location or site of the meeting should be:

- Familiar and accessible to community people in that community
- Comfortable with adequate heating, ventilation, lighting
- Neutral location that is a non-threatening location for that community
- Adequate, well lighted parking

The first impression of the meeting room sets the atmosphere for the discussion. It is important that the room be:

- Comfortable with enough seating for number of participants expected
- Quiet or the ability to close door to room if other activities going on
- Space for child care, if needed
- Good lighting

Ideal the chairs should be in a circle or in a circle around a table so that all of the participants can see the moderator and vice-versa. The Moderator should be seated in the circle with the Assistant moderator seated directly opposite so that he or she can hear all participants clearly. Avoid unequal seating arrangements as much as possible (i.e., where some participants are quite close to moderator and some far away from moderator)

Equipment and Supplies

- Tape recorder or other recording device
- 2 cassette tapes if using a tape recorder
- Extension cord
- Name tags or tent cards (optional)
- Legal pad and 4–5 pens or pencils for note taking
- Sign in sheet for participants (optional)
- Manila envelope for anonymous questionnaires (if applicable)
- Copies of questionnaires
- 1 Flip chart sheet with ground rules printed on it and masking tape for posting (optional)
- Handouts/information provided

Moderator Do's and Don'ts

The Moderator sits in the circle, provides introduction and facilitates discussion of each question. The moderator is key to the success of the discussion. This section will outline the expectations of moderators along with some do and don'ts.

Expectations of Moderators

Before the Listening Session

- Confirm date, place, time, and number of participants with contact for host group
- Coordinate logistics with assistant moderator (location, arrival time, supplies)
- Practice your introduction
- Be comfortable with the questions
- Arrive early
- Be well rested
- Set up space: arrange chairs, make sure area is as quiet as possible
- Help host set up any refreshments
- Have materials for note taking

During the Listening Session

- Welcome people
- Begin the group close to the designated time and conclude by the ending time. Monitor your time to be sure all questions are discussed
- Introduce yourself and the project (remind people why they are there)
- Explain use of recording device and ask the group's permission to record the session
- Explain ground rules for discussion
- Explain confidentiality
- Group introductions—it is good to ask a question that you “go around” and have everyone answer. It is easier for people to talk later if they have already said something to the group
- Take some basic notes as you ask questions to help in summarizing issues raised or in probing for specifics
- Don't offer your opinions
- Do not answer questions regarding your views or opinions
- Use pauses and probes to obtain information
- Control your verbal and nonverbal reactions to participants (e.g., “great,” or head nodding)
- Use key facilitation behaviors (see Guidelines)
- Remember to remain neutral, and elicit participation from everyone
- Ask ending question “Have we missed anything?”
- At the end of the session, thank everyone

After the Listening Session

- Conduct debriefing with Assistant Moderator: Fill any gaps in the notes. Refer to the recorded information as needed to fill in gaps
- Decide who will type the written summary from the notes
- Review typed summary for accuracy and completeness with Assistant Moderator and amend as needed. (Refer to the recorded information as needed to insure accuracy of key points and/or quotes)
- Send summary to _____ by _____
- Attend (your organization) reporting session when scheduled to:
 - Share your summary report
 - Listen to reports of other moderators
 - Interpret results and develop recommendations

Effective moderators:

- Have a good memory
- Communicate clearly in speech and in writing
- Demonstrate respect for participants
- Make participants feel comfortable and supported
- Clearly explain the purpose of the discussion
- Demonstrate enthusiasm about the project
- Can clearly explain how the data will be used and who will have access to it
- Clarify each question for participants
- Facilitate and guide discussion by being able to:
 - Prevent the domination of discussion by an individual or subset of the group
 - Model good listening
 - Maintain a neutral, impartial role
 - Avoid answering or addressing issues raised
 - Provide positive reinforcement for participant input
- Keep the discussion focused without dominating it
- Dress and behave appropriately for the group
- Introduce themselves in ways that define common ground with those being interviewed

Moderators need to avoid:

- Talking too much
- Not allowing silence to work
- Leading participants
- Advocating a particular position or solution
- Appearing judgmental or appearing to approve or support one position (e.g., head nodding)

Moderator Introduction Suggestion

Welcome Participants. “Good evening, and welcome to our discussion. We appreciate your willingness to take the time to join this discussion. I’m _____ and I will be your moderator. Assisting me is _____ who will take notes during the session. We are volunteers representing the (name of your group). We thank the (host person and host organization) for allowing us to hold this discussion here today.”

(Also provide any needed information; i.e., where bathrooms are located, participants can get up and move about when necessary, food available.)

Provide Overview. “The (name of your group) is a group of individuals and organizations that has come together to see what might be done locally to improve health and health care access in (your) County. In order to do this, we need to better understand community members’ views about health and health care. We are interested in your views of all aspects of health including physical health, mental health, and other aspects you feel are important. Our purpose is to gain information from community members throughout (your) County, and to use that information to address the most important concerns.

“You have been asked to participate because we think you can tell us what you and others in the (local community name) community are experiencing related to health and health care. This will be the focus of our discussion today.”

Review Ground Rules

“We will meet for about 1-1½ hours during which time we will ask you several questions.

“Everything that is said here is confidential and neither you nor we should repeat any personal information when outside of this room. We would like to, with your permission, record the session so when summarizing the interview we can be sure we have your statements recorded as accurately as possible. No one will hear the recorded information but the assistant moderator and myself. We will erase the information as soon as we’ve completed a written summary of the interview. If everyone is comfortable with our using a recorder, we’ll turn it on when we start asking questions.” (Watch for group agreement)

“There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, only opinions. We encourage you to offer those opinions even if they differ from what someone else has said.

“As moderator and assistant moderator, our role is to listen to your views and ideas and record them as accurately as possible. Sometimes we will ask you follow-up questions so we can make sure that we understand what you have said, or we may ask that you give us a specific example.

“We encourage *everyone* to participate. We realize that some people like to talk in groups and some people are less comfortable. We want you all to feel comfortable sharing your views.

“We ask that you speak one at a time, again so that we can be sure that your views are heard.”

Confidentiality

“As I said, you may be assured of complete confidentiality. Everything that we say is confidential and no one’s name will be listed with any written summaries of the discussion. We will only report on the issues cited for this group as a whole. We also need your agreement not to discuss any information shared by individuals in the group with anyone outside of the group. Will everyone indicate their agreement by nodding their head?”

“We’ve also given you a copy of the questions that we will be asking so that you can follow along during the session and for keeping your own notes, if you like. If you have any responses that you do not feel comfortable sharing in the group, write them on this questionnaire and place it in this manila envelope at the end of the interview. The questionnaire is anonymous. You do not need to write your name on it.

“*Does anyone have any questions?* If you want to know more about the listening sessions or the final results, you can call (give name and phone number).”

Some more specifics about our discussion, to help in answering questions.

“Information gathered will help the (name of your group) determine:

- Current community practices for maintaining health,
- Kinds of health problems that you think occur most often in your community,
- Barriers people have to good health,
- Community ideas for solutions to health problems,
- Identification of groups of people underserved for health needs.”

Moderator Guide to the Questions

The following section lists the questions, some possible prompts to use with them and the rationale behind each question. First, a word about probes and prompts.

Probes and prompts are questions you may want to use to elicit additional information beyond that given in response to the initial question. They do not have to be used if participants are openly and completely answering the major questions. It is important that probes and prompts be worded in such a way that is not leading the respondent. It helps to stick to open-ended prompts, like “What about transportation,” “What about costs of medicines?”

Some possible prompts are included in this *Moderator Guide to the Questions*. Only use them if participants seem stuck or do not address these issues themselves. You may want to use other prompts based on issues raised in previous questions. You can also use prompts to elicit more specific information, for example, “Why do you think that happened?” or “Tell me more about that,” or “Can you give me an example?” Prompts help you explore consensus as well: After one participant offers a response, you can say, “How do the rest of you feel?”

Opening Question

1. *“Let’s go around the room and have each one of you introduce yourself and tell us what you think is the best thing about living in this community.”*

The opening question is designed more to establish the participation of everyone rather than to get “hard” information. It is designed to involve each participant one at a time in the group discussion. It breaks the ice and gets each participant talking. Once a participant has said something, it becomes easier to speak again. This question will also help identify perceived assets in the various communities.

Introductory Question

2. *“What do people in this community do to stay healthy?”*
“How do people get information about health?”

Possible Prompts: *“What about personal healthy behaviors?”*

“What about getting check-ups or health screenings?”

“What about physicians?”

“What about other providers?”

“What about pharmacists?”

“What about neighbors?”

“What about family?”

“What about health food stores?”

The open-ended introductory question begins to focus on the topic. It can also give the moderator clues about where the participants are coming from and may be useful for suggesting future prompts. Occasionally, the participants will offer answers to introductory questions that are completely unanticipated and may lead to additional probes or follow-up questions. The probe allows the Moderator to explore how people get information that helps them stay healthy.

Key Questions

These are the questions that drive the study. The report on the listening sessions will focus primarily on the responses to these questions. The moderator will need to spend the most time on these questions and probe for specificity in participants’ responses.

3. *“In this group’s opinion, what are the serious health problems in your community?”*
“What are some causes of these problems?”

Possible Prompts: *“What about physical health problems?”*

“What about social problems that affect health (e.g., violence, substance abuse)?”

“What about mental health problems?”

The open-ended question helps to focus discussion on what problems are of most concern in this community. The follow up question probes for participants’ perceptions and insights about what might be causes for the problems that they have identified in the first question. It will help to probe for causes for each health problem identified right after it is mentioned.

4. *“What keeps people in your community from being healthy?”*
Possible Prompts: *“What about costs of medical office visits?”*
“What about costs of medicines?”
“What about health insurance?”
“What about costs of other types of health services?”
“What about availability of information on health and health services?”
“What about challenges of having healthy habits?”

The open-ended questions help to elicit participants’ views of barriers and challenges that prevent people in their community from maintaining good health and accessing health care services.

Summarize: Before question 5, the moderator should succinctly summarize the health problems, barriers and challenges heard in questions 3 and 4, to help the group focus their discussion of solutions in the next question.

5. *“What could be done to solve these problems?”*

The open-ended question allows participants to share their views of possible solutions to the health problems, their causes and barriers that they have discussed in the previous questions.

6. *“Is there any group not receiving enough health care? If so, why?”*

This question helps the participants to consider and identify specific groups in their community or the county that are particularly underutilizing, or underserved by, local health care resources.

Ending Question

This final question allows participants to bring up any issues missed in prior questions and wraps up the interview.

7. *“Is there anything else you would like to add, or you think would be helpful for us to know?”*

During the Listening Session, Use These Key Facilitative Behaviors

1. Prompt for specifics and details
2. Keep everyone participating
3. Respect and use periods of silence
4. Remain neutral at all times
5. Relax and have fun

After the Listening Session

“Thank you for participating in our discussion today. Your responses will be summarized along with those of other community groups in our county that are hosting these sessions. The results will be shared with the members of the (name of group) in (date) to help them in determining the most important health issues in our County.”

“Thanks again to (host person and host group) hosting this session.”

Assistant Moderator Do's and Don'ts

Expectations of Assistant Moderators

The Assistant Moderator or Recorder sits opposite from the Moderator and takes detailed notes. He or she can introduce probes as necessary. If session is recorded, he or she will need proximity to outlet and the ability to position the recorder to best record all participants.

Before the Discussion

- Pack Supplies - a legal pad and two pens for note-taking and copies of the questions for participants.
- Arrange Room - Rearrange chairs and table (if any) so everyone can see each other.
- Set Up and Test Recorder - Place recorder as central to where participants will be seated as possible. Bring an extension cord to help in reaching outlets. Test recorded to be sure it is working properly. Record the date, time, and place of the session prior to starting the session so the recorded information can be easily identified.
- Post flip chart sheet showing ground rules (optional)

During the Listening Session

- Welcome participants as they arrive. Make small talk and introduce participants to each other.
- Sit in designated location - Assistant moderator should sit opposite the moderator, and close to the door. If someone arrives after the session begins, meet the person at the door, take them outside of the room and give them a short briefing as to what has happened and the current topic of discussion. Then bring the late participant into the room and show him or her where to sit.
- Take detailed notes throughout the discussion - Record the key issues raised in participants' answers. Try to record important quotes that best illustrate participants' views.
- Keep track of whether or not the recorder is working properly - Deal with any problems that may occur.
- Observe the discussion and introduce probes as needed - Monitor non-verbal reactions and comfort level of group participants. Introduce probes as needed to help the moderator draw out comments from all participants. Control your non-verbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.
- Ask questions when invited - At the end of the discussion the moderator may invite you to ask questions of amplification or clarification.

After the Listening Session

- Mail a thank you note to the host group
- Conduct debriefing with Moderator. Fill any gaps in the notes. Refer to the recorded information as needed for items missed or needing clarification in the notes
- Decide who will type the written summary from the notes (Moderator or Assistant Moderator)
- Review typed summary with Moderator and amend as needed. Refer to the recorded information as needed to insure accuracy of key points and/or quotes

- Send summary to _____ by _____
- Attend (your organization) reporting session when scheduled to:
 - Share your summary report
 - Listen to reports of other moderators
 - Interpret results
 - Develop recommendations

Note Taking Tips for Assistant Moderators

Note taking is a primary responsibility of the assistant moderator. (The moderator is not expected to take detailed written notes during the discussion in order to maintain maximum eye contact with participants during the session.) Note taking is important even if the session is also being recorded in order to highlight strong quotes and themes, record observed non-verbal activity, or any discussion missed in the event of the recording device fails. Here are some tips:

- Have plenty of paper available for note taking and 2 pens (or well-sharpened pencils) in case one runs out of ink.
- To help keep track of participants' names and who is saying what, make a sketch in your note pad of the seating arrangement with initials or first name of each seated participant. Alternatively, you can just assign each participant a number. *While participants' names will not appear in the final written summary of the listening session, it is helpful to indicate participants' initials or assigned number by their specific comments in your handwritten notes. You can then follow up with a participant for clarification of their comment if necessary or if you need to refer back to that comment later in the session.*
- When capturing notable quotes, listen for well-said quotes. Capture word for word as much of the statement as possible. Listen for sentences or phrases that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a particular point of view. Place name or initial of speaker after the quotations. Usually, it is impossible to capture the entire quote. Capture as much as you can with attention to the key phrases. Use three periods ... to indicate that part of the quote was missing.
- In your notes, write phrases or key words that best capture or express the key ideas. (This will help in identifying key themes later as you write the summary.)
- Note the non-verbal activity. Watch for the obvious, such as head nods, physical excitement, eye contact between certain participants, or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support or interest.
- Indicate areas of strong consensus in your notes. Place an asterisk by key points or ideas where there was agreement by several people. You can also record in brackets other observed signs of consensus (for example, "lots of yes's here" or "lots of head-nodding here").
- If a question occurs to you that you would like to ask at the end of the discussion, write it down in a circle or box so it will be remembered.

The materials in this toolkit are adapted from information on Listening Sessions from the Mountain Area Health Education Center's Community Health Resources Services (CHRS) and from Krueger, R. (1994) Listening to MES Customers: A Plan for the Minnesota Extension Service to listen to its customers and employees. Minnesota Extension Service.