

Holding Emotional Spaces

It is important to welcome emotions in your group. Reaching out to people in your communities and focusing energy on connecting with them is difficult work and requires ongoing attention, so it is important to create space and time to share how you are feeling with others. Not only can this help you connect with yourself, it can also help you avoid burnout.

In your groups, consider creating opportunities for deep check-ins, so that you can support one another and overcome any hurdles you might be facing. Deep check-ins function as emotional spaces, in which everyone is able to share what they are feeling, what they are struggling with, and what brings them joy. When we can express ourselves openly, without shame, it enables us to fully process and reflect on our emotions. This is not therapy. Instead, it is a tool we can use to help build networks of mutual caring. If we make space for our own emotions and those of others, we can create a culture of support and model the society we wish to live in.

Emotional spaces are so important because we are not generally encouraged to express our emotions in our daily lives in a healthy way. We all feel, but we aren't able to let those feelings out and we aren't taught how to seek help for them. We are not raised to be comfortable with emotion. We see powerful feelings as shameful or even dangerous things. It is not socially acceptable, for example, to cry in public; unless we perceive that the person crying has a 'good reason' to cry we may consider them weak or unstable; even if we are sympathetic, our instinct is to shut it down, through fussing and fixing or even through force.

Can you remember being a child and your caregiver becoming angry because you were expressing sadness or frustration? Indeed, much of the advice around childhood tantrums – an ordinary stage of human development – centres around how parents/carers can best snuff them out. Very little, if any, is said about the right of the child to have their emotions, and to express the strength of their feelings in a non-violent way. When parents/carers respond to tantrums or crying or whining in an angry, adversarial way, the child learns that their feelings are not welcome. They do not learn how to deal with their feelings, only that they should distance themselves from them. Children may subsequently come to fear their emotions, to ignore them and/or to bury them. These childhood wounds carry through to adulthood and have big repercussions both for our health and wellbeing, and for our relationships with others.

You can't selectively numb emotions, they are all natural. Pain and grief come from the same place as joy and pleasure, so when we suppress the 'negative' emotions in an effort to protect ourselves, we also tamper our ability to share happiness and to be at peace. And how can we possibly hope to form meaningful connections if we are so busy protecting ourselves? Intimacy cannot be achieved without vulnerability; it is only when we stop feeling shame about our natural feelings that we are able to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to others.

Your ability to hold an effective emotional space will depend on your group's trust for one another, how far you have set the foundation of mutual respect and fellowship.

Resources

Try to find a quiet, comfortable space where people can talk without being overheard. It may be a good idea to have a timer so that you can ensure everyone has the same amount of time to speak. Tissues as well will be useful – we are welcoming people’s feelings and there might be tears! Tea, coffee and biscuits are good resources too.

Be sure to allow time for decompression after the sharing, and a space where the group can reconvene in a casual way after an intensive shared experience. It may also be a good idea, especially if you have a big group, to have a gathering time 10-15 minutes before the ‘starting in earnest’ time, to give people opportunity to arrive at a leisurely pace and get into the right headspace beforehand.

If it feels right, and you have the time, a period of group meditation, or just listening to calming music together, doing some yoga or stretching can be an effective exercise in mental alignment. This will depend on the preferences of the group, and their level of comfort with each other.

Remember, as with any meeting, to consider the time of day and the venue to ensure it is accessible to everyone. Incorporating technology (Zoom conferencing etc.) may be a useful way to include those who cannot necessarily be there in person.

Roles

Facilitator

The facilitator’s role is to ‘hold the space’ and guide the session: introduce the deep check-in, kick it off and support participants where needed. You are not in charge, you are managing the space not the people in it.

The facilitator always takes a turn in the group – you are part of the group. It can be useful to take your turn first as sometimes you can model being open about your feelings, and this helps the rest of the group.

When it’s someone’s turn to speak, the others generally don’t say anything. However, on rare occasions some gentle words of encouragement from the facilitator may be useful (e.g. “it’s OK to cry”). Though be aware that if a lot of people offer such verbal support, it can ‘take over’ the person’s turn.

Before deep check-in, ensure that you have practised facilitating group spaces and are comfortable with the responsibility of holding a safe emotional space. It can help to have a co-facilitator, whose job is to provide reassurance to you, handle timings, and generally help with making the group work well.

Buddies

For some groups, it might work well to create a buddy system. This sort of system works effectively if people are sitting close together and allows each person in the group to have someone offering

them additional emotional support if it is needed - if, for example, they become upset, their buddy can offer them tissue or a hand to hold / an arm around the shoulder. If this approach is being taken, it can be discussed at the beginning during the facilitator's introductory talk. Please note, it is important to ensure people have the opportunity to express whether or not they are comfortable with physical contact.

Conflict resolution point person

It is important to decide on a clear process to resolve conflicts, which is agreed upon by the group. The facilitator or co-facilitator can handle conflicts, or you may prefer another member of the group be there for conflict resolution responsibilities. It may be that someone who has experience with non-violent communication or de-escalation is well suited to this role.

Meeting structure

You will want to keep things open, but a loose structure will help to enable sharing.

This is an example meeting based on 8 people with 90 minutes active time

1. **Check in:** Each person says something about how they are feeling right now, or something they are grateful for, or similar. You can be creative. This should be quite short, say 30 seconds per person.

~5 minutes total

2. **Talk:** The facilitator gives a talk about emotional debriefing and how the meeting will work. (See the suggested talk notes below.)

~10 minutes

3. **Timed Turns:** Each person in the group gets a chance to talk for an equal amount of time. The facilitator is timing them. In our example there are 70 minutes available for this part. For 8 people this gives about 7 minutes each, if we assume about 1 minute to switch between people.

You might want to include a stretch/toilet break halfway through this section so people aren't sitting and listening continuously for a long period of time.

4. **Checkout:** It's good to end on a positive note here. One way is for each person to say something that they liked about being in the group. If some have talked about difficult things in their turns it can be useful to have a go-round at the end of the group where each person in turn talks briefly [one sentence] about something good that they've noticed in their life, or in the world, even if it's a small thing.

~30 seconds per person.

~5 minutes total.

Total: 84 minutes.

Facilitator's talk

Here is where you introduce a topic or question that is relevant to all the people in the group. You may have talked about this beforehand. It is also where you introduce the process and purpose.

Here is an example (please note, this is one way to run an emotional debrief session – there are many other ways to do it):

Reaching out to others in our communities can be difficult, tiring and emotional work. And that is OK. We are taking steps to work and connect with others, and in so doing are stepping out of our comfort zones and making ourselves vulnerable. This can not only trigger emotional pain from our past that has not been resolved, it can also leave us open to pain in the encounters we might have, or in our reflections on the state of society.

It is important to acknowledge these emotions and start to process them, so that they don't impact your well-being and/or your community work. Example feelings might be fear or guilt, or feeling like people don't like you, or you don't like others...

Whatever they are, it is important to address them and push past the desire to ignore how we are feeling. Most of us have been conditioned to hide the full depth of our feelings, but here we are aiming to create a space where we can show them and support each other.

Being listened to with loving attention helps people to release painful emotions:

The undivided, loving attention of other human beings is a valuable resource. It can allow deep healing to occur. This kind of attention tends not to happen in normal conversations or discussions because a lot of our attention can be taken up with looking for a space to start talking. When a clear space is organised for each person to speak everyone can relax a bit. The person speaking knows they have time to explore and express what's in their mind. Whilst the listeners know that they don't have to fight for the space to speak or think about what they want to say next – they can relax and pay full attention to the person who's turn it is to talk.

This provides an enormous boost to the level of attention each person gets from the group.

We will each have a turn to speak without interruption from others. In your turn, you can talk about whatever you need to, without judgement from anyone. This frees up your mind to do the work you need to do. It's important that we all allow space for the person talking to feel their full feelings – we don't need to stop that happening.

Our job as listeners is to direct 100% of our care and attention onto the person whose turn it is to talk. Emotional release is welcome and encouraged, for example, crying, laughing, sweating, trembling, expressing indignation, yawning, and other things. Don't interrupt someone else's turn to talk about your own thoughts.

It's good to show that you care about them, but if you are not careful how you express that you can end up intruding into that person's space. It has become all about you! Just smiling and keeping your loving attention on them is mostly all that is needed.

We will divide up the remaining time between the people present, leaving some time for a check out. In general, we encourage people to take the whole of their allotted time, even if they can't think of what to say. The silence may feel uncomfortable for everyone, but it's useful to sit with this discomfort. (One reason why humanity is in crisis is because a lot of the important things we need to do are on the other side of some discomfort, and we find it hard to stay with that discomfort.)

This text can (and should!) be adapted.

Group agreements

It's important to have group agreements to make the participants feel safe and ensure everything runs smoothly. You can decide together what is important to you to enable openness. Introduce the agreements to the group during your talk, explain their purpose and request agreement from each participant. This is a chance, as well, to pre-empt any conflicts.

[Example talk:]

These agreements can help to make the group feel safer:

- 1. Confidentiality: what someone says in their turn in the group should not be repeated to anyone else, not even the person who said it, unless they give permission. It's easy to give specific or general permission, for example "you can ask me about this afterwards", or "Do we all agree that we can talk about what was said today in this group amongst ourselves?".*
- 2. Treat people with kindness and respect. We all struggle and make mistakes. Give each person the space to speak what's in their mind, as it sits in their mind. We all need the space to say exactly what's in our minds as this allows us to review our thoughts, and perhaps change our minds. Confidentiality helps to create this space.*
- 3. People might talk about other people in their turn. Don't believe anything that anyone says about another person. Even though we are creating the space for people to express what's in their minds, it's good to avoid criticizing other people in your turn to talk as this tends to make the group feel less safe for everyone. Instead it is good to try to identify and talk about your own difficulties. Use 'I' statements to avoid this.*

Can I get a temperature check from everyone please, that we agree to these;

[End of talk]

It may also be an idea to go over the hand signals, if anyone is unfamiliar with them. You can talk through any disagreements here, time allowing.

Things to consider

This kind of group works best with around four to eight people. It can work with fewer, but it may become less useful with more than eight. If there are more than eight people present then it may be best to divide into two groups if there is someone else who is willing to facilitate.

When dividing up the time for turns, if you have six people and 30 minutes, then giving five minutes each will overrun as there is often significant 'turnaround time' between each person. About one minute of turnaround time is usually enough, so 30 minutes between six people gives about four minutes each.

Make sure you budget time for checkouts. These are for everyone to 'sum up' what they have gained from the session or something they are grateful for from the session.

If people don't have anything else to say they could be gently prompted to tell their life story - how they got from being born to this point in time. It's a challenge to do this in a short amount of time, but often an interesting challenge. You can tell your life story many times and each time it's different. This has proven to be a great format for increasing connection and understanding within a group of people.

We are aiming to create a special, safe space in these emotional debrief groups. Often after deep check-ins, people feel more deeply connected to people in the group, that's good and is part of the purpose of the group. However, if you meet someone for the first time in a group like this then you may make the mistake of thinking that how you see them in the group is how they will be outside the group. This is unrealistic and can lead to disappointment. It's important to temper our experience with the understanding that our wider culture does not support this kind of radical vulnerability, and that it can and will be emotionally draining, so a deep check-in does not mean deep bonds beyond the check-in. Be patient with one another.

This is about 'holding space' for emotions; for love, reflection, tears, laughter, processing, overcoming, ruminating and whatever else we need to sort through. It's not about dumping our problems on others, it's about being able to empty that emotional rucksack that's been full for so long, it's about letting others support us as we do the same for them.

“In every community, there is work to be done.
In every nation, there are wounds to heal.
In every heart, there is the power to do it.”
-- **Marianne Williamson**