

Focus Groups Toolkit

WHAT Are Focus Groups?

A focus group is a small-group discussion (6-12 individuals) guided by a trained leader (facilitator). Focus groups are used to learn about opinions on a specific topic, and to guide future action. Who is invited to participate in the group and questions to talk about are carefully planned to create a safe space for people to talk openly. Group members are actively encouraged to express their opinions.



WHY Use a Focus Group Approach?

Focus groups are useful when:

- You are considering the introduction of a new program or service.
- You want to collect more in-depth information and ask questions that can't easily be asked or answered on a written survey.
- You want to add to information you gain from written surveys or other information sources.
- You have the time, knowledge, and resources to recruit a willing group of focus group participants.

Pros and Cons of Focus Groups

Some Benefits of Focus Groups



Group discussion can provide rich information as participants share and help each other consider different ways of thinking about or experiencing an issue

Represents diverse opinions and ideas; gathers information from those who are most involved in an issue or have expert knowledge about the topic

Relatively low cost and efficient way to generate a great deal of information



Some Drawbacks of Focus Groups

Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by more vocal participants

The focus group leader (facilitator) can affect what or how participants share their opinions, which can mean the discussion might not accurately reflect the participants' opinions

The small number of people participating in a focus group may not express the viewpoints of a bigger population of similar people

HOW to Do Focus Groups?

How to Plan and Recruit for Focus Groups

Once you've decided that a focus group is the right method, then planning for the group can begin. There are a number of things to consider before you can begin inviting people to participate (recruitment).

First, you need to determine **what** you hope to learn and **who** you hope to learn this information from. It's helpful to have a few key questions (research questions) that you are trying to answer, which will help you in writing clear and focused questions for your group. You also need to know about the group you're hoping to recruit. For example, are you interested in speaking with a group that represents your overall community, or do you want to get input from specific sub-populations? Typically, you want to recruit participants that have something in common (e.g., background, experience, geographic location). It may be useful to have some **demographic** information about your community members (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, employment, religion).

Knowing this information will be important when making decisions about your recruitment strategy and the logistics (e.g., location, day of the week, time of day, incentive) for the focus group that are most convenient for your group. This may involve holding the group in the evening or on a weekend, and in a comfortable, easy-to-find place in the community, such as a library or community center. Think about the individuals and partners who can help with recruitment. This could involve posting flyers at a grocery store, recruiting patients from a service provider's office, or recruiting after a church service. Have materials prepared that can be shared with potential participants that include all the relevant information—date, time, location, topic that will be discussed, incentives that will be provided, and contact information. And do your best to secure a commitment at the time of recruitment (you may also want to let people know that the invitation is specific to them and ask that they contact you if they have to cancel, instead of sending someone in their place). Typically, it is recommended that you recruit 15-20 participants because usually half of those committed are no-shows.

HOW to Do Focus Groups?

Checklist of Key Activities That Will Need to Take Place:

- ☐ Review other information - determine what information you have on the specific topic
- ☐ Recheck your goals - determine what you're hoping to learn from the group
- ☐ Find your group facilitator
- ☐ Find a recorder - someone that can take notes during the group
- ☐ Decide who should be invited
- ☐ Decide about incentives - this can include a meal, child care, and/or gift cards
- ☐ Decide on meeting particulars (day, place, time, length of meeting, how many groups)
- ☐ Develop recruitment strategy and materials - identify where you will recruit and who will help
- ☐ Prepare your focus group questions
- ☐ Recruit your participants
- ☐ Double check the arrangements
- ☐ Remind participants - call, text, and email the day before the group and encourage them to arrive early

How to Write Questions for a Focus Group

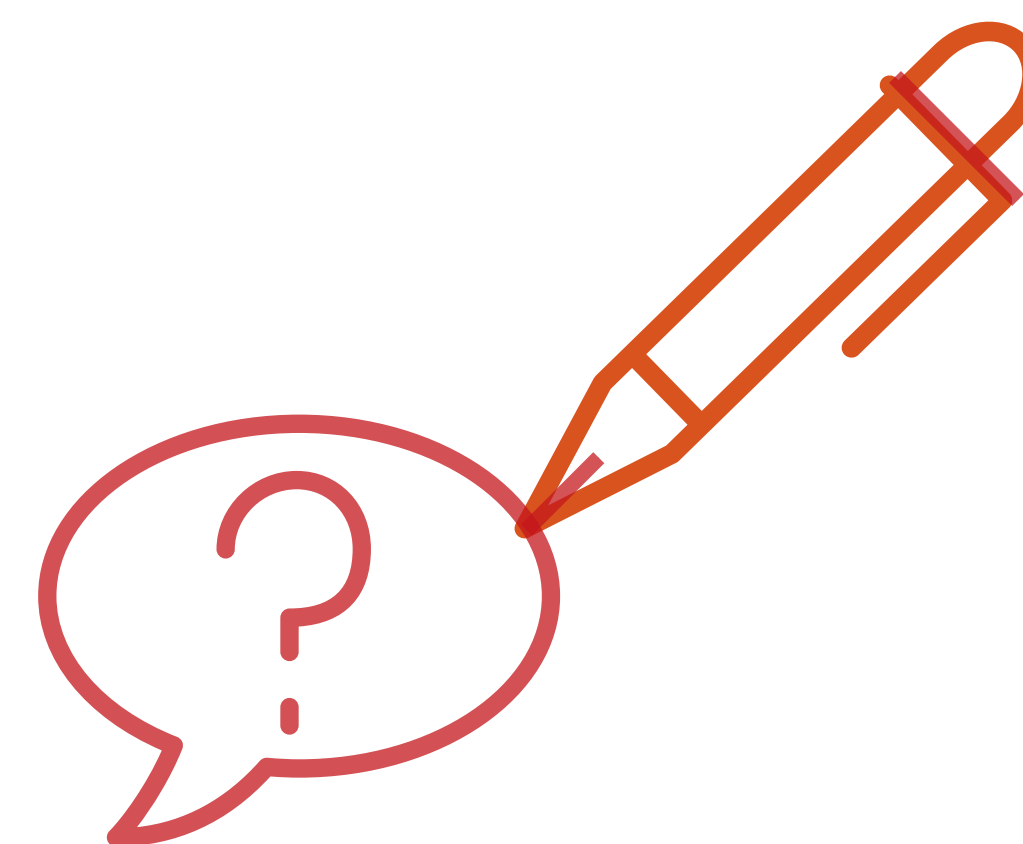
Go in prepared. Use your team to develop a list of topics and questions that you want to ask. Remember that it will take some time for participants to answer these questions, so make sure that you prepare questions that will result in powerful information.

Tips on Developing Questions

- Use open ended questions (not questions with a “yes” or “no” answer)
- Ask one thing at a time (instead of asking about more than one thing at a time)
- Use “think back” questions (e.g., “please think back to a time when you...”)
- Use different types of questions (see text box)
- Use questions that get participants involved or raise their curiosity
- Focus the questions (a sequence that goes from general to specific)

Good Questions

- Sound conversational and inviting (instead of sounding formal or scary)
- Are easy to say
- Are simple
- Use words that participants would use



Examples of General Questions That Can Be Adapted

Types of Questions	Examples
Opening Question	Tell us a little bit about yourself. What brought you here today?
Introductory Question	What are your general thoughts about X? (Or, What's going on now?)
Transition Question	What are you satisfied about? (Or, What's going well?) Why is that? Are there things that you are dissatisfied with, that you would like to see changed? (Or, What's not going well?)
Key Question	How about this particular aspect (of the topic)? What do you think about that? Some people have said that one way to improve X is to do Y. How do you feel about that? Probes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you say more about that? What led up to that?• What was that like? Can you give an example?• How about you, Shannon? (Shannon, you haven't had a chance to say anything.)• Does anyone else have some thoughts on that?
Ending Question	Are there other recommendations that you have, or suggestions you would like to make? Are there other things you would like to say before we wind up? Is there anything that you really wanted to talk about, but I didn't ask you about? (Or, Have we missed anything?) Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?

HOW to Do Focus Groups?

How to Facilitate the Group Discussion

Having a strong facilitator is important. Ideally, the facilitator will be knowledgeable about the topic and able to listen attentively and with empathy. In general, the facilitator has the following roles and responsibilities:

- Follow the focus group guide you develop
- Be very familiar with topic area and focus group questions
- Put participants at ease – establish rapport and create a comfortable, informal environment for discussion
- Set expectations for participation and share group norms
- Let participants know that in order to hear from everyone and cover all of the important topics, you may respectfully need to limit their responses in order to keep the conversation moving
- Ensure confidentiality & obtain consent (written or verbal)
- Record the discussion (use recording device or have a note taker)
- Keep participants engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use time effectively (do their best to end on time)

On the day of the focus group, be sure to arrive early to set up the room. Put up any signage, in case your location is hard to find. Have a sign-in sheet ready near the room entrance. It is recommended that chairs and/or tables be arranged so that everyone is facing each other, like in a circle. If using a recording device, find a location that can pick up all voices and test it out. Make arrangements for any food that may be delivered. Have consent forms, and name cards or name tents ready for distribution. Be sure to warmly greet each person as they arrive. Establishing rapport can make people feel at ease, in case they are nervous about their participation. If you have ordered food, encourage participants to help themselves. Be respectful of those who were prompt, and start on time.

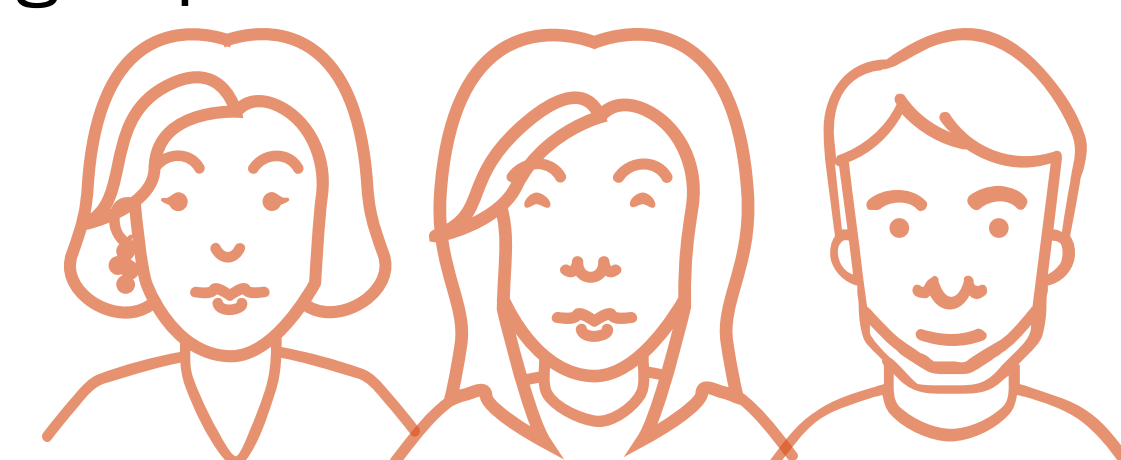
Typical Steps in the Focus Group Process

- 1 Describe the purpose of the group and how this information will be used. This is typically mentioned when you have participants sign the consent form.
- 2 Remind participants that their participation is voluntary, that the group is not linked to any services nor will it affect their eligibility for services they may be receiving.
- 3 Review the group norms for conducting the group. You may choose to write these on a flip chart and solicit additional group norms from participants. These may include:
 - Being respectful of the opinions of others
 - No interrupting or talking over other people
 - Keep information confidential and do not share with others
- 4 Start with an icebreaker that is not too personal to allow for some “getting to know each other” time.
- 5 Ask the questions included in the focus group guide. Determine how much time you have to solicit answers for each question and keep track of time, to ensure you get to all the questions.
- 6 Thank everyone for attending, hand out incentives, and encourage participants to contact you if they have follow up questions.

Facilitation Tips

A good facilitator remains neutral, does not insert their ideas or feelings to the group discussion, and tries to ensure that everyone participates. Sometimes this process can be difficult to manage if you have challenging participants - who dominate the conversation, who are quiet, and who divert the conversation.

- Define key terms—consider having handouts or writing on flipchart, if needed.
- Use purposeful small talk—this will help establish rapport before the focus group.
- Take time to familiarize yourself with the questions, so you know them well.
- During the group:
 - Do not share your personal opinions on the given topic.
 - Use subtle group control—make eye contact with quiet participants or look away from those that are dominating discussion.



HOW to Do Focus Groups?

- Use a statement such as, “let’s hear from those who haven’t shared” or “do others have any thoughts on this?” to try to draw out more quiet participants and discourage dominant talkers.
- Minimize affirming statements and nonverbal reactions—head nodding; stating “that’s good.”
- Maintain neutral body language and use neutral comments, such as “thank you for sharing,” “please explain,” or “can you share an example?” or “anything else?”
- Ask for clarification if something is not clear.
- Pause for an answer if no one responds right away.
- Repeat the question or state a different way, if no one initially responds.
- Repeat the reply, especially for quiet talkers.
- Use transitional phrases, such as “let’s shift the discussion to talk more about ____” or “I would like to hear your thoughts on ____” or “in the interest of time, let’s move to the next question,” if you need to move on or if the group has gotten off topic.

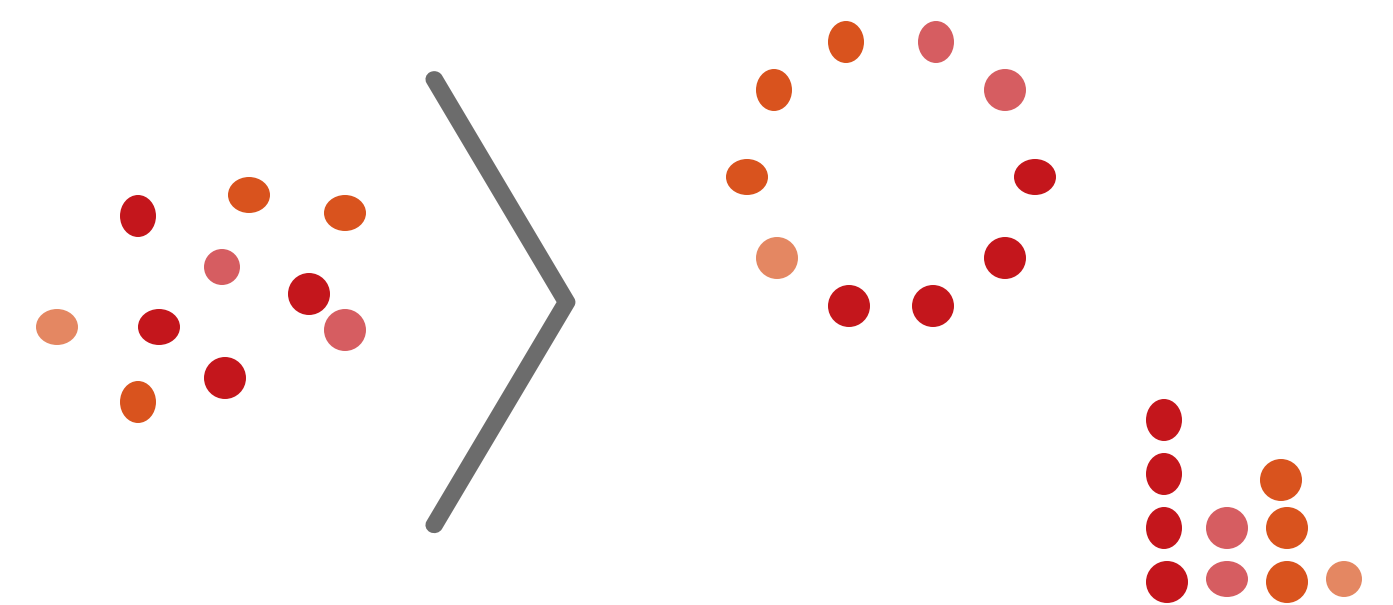
How to Use Focus Group Information to Make Decisions

Look at the Data

If you have tape-recorded the discussion, make a transcript. If not, make a written summary from the group notes. But in any case, look closely at the information you have collected.

In some cases, you can use a coding system to “score” the data and count the number of times a particular theme is expressed. Experience helps here. But whether you do this or not, try to have more than one person review the results independently. (Because even the best of us have our biases.) Then come together to compare your interpretations and conclusions.

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions seem true?



Share Results With the Group

They gave you their time, so you should give them some feedback – it’s an obligation that you have. This can be done by mail, phone, or email if you’d like. Sometimes it’s even possible to bring the group back for a second session, to review results, verify their accuracy, and/or explore other themes.

Note: Perhaps members have now become more interested in the issue, and would like to get more involved. Consider offering them an opportunity to do so. A focus group, indirectly, can be a recruiting tool.

Use the Results

Collecting useful information was the reason you wanted to do a focus group in the first place. Now you have the opportunity, and perhaps also the responsibility, to put it to use. You can improve the situation that originally motivated you, and made you think about a focus group at the very beginning.

Content adapted from:

Focus Group Research Methods – Notes. 2015. Richard A. Krueger, PhD, and Mary Anne Casey, PhD. retrieved from: <https://richardmaryanne.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/notes-focus-group-interviewing-research-methods.doc>

Center for Community Health and Development. (2017). Chapter 3, Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved August 15, 2017, from the Community Tool Box: <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>

Questions, Comments, Feedback?

